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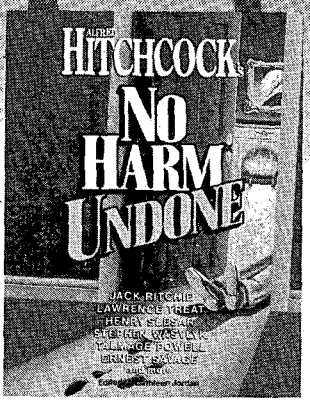

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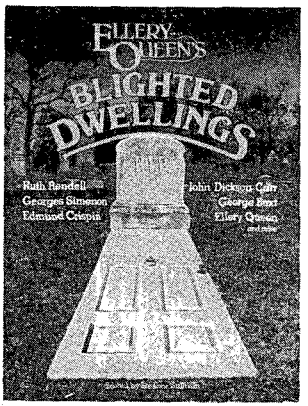

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DETECTIVERSE

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

by MIRIAM BISKIN

She upped my hand in reckless play
And passed when she knew she shouldn't—
If I protested, she'd only say,
"Oh, dear, I thought I couldn't."

She was noted for her high I.Q.,
But blithely trumped my aces—
Then recklessly went to five No Trump
With a hand devoid of faces.

She babbled and gossiped lightly,
Crunched every tidbit served,
As our partners smiled politely
And I became unnerved.

It was futile to try to teach her
Any new convention—
Just keeping track of thirteen cards
Demanded her full attention.

I told myself it was just a game
As I was scuttled by dear wifie,
But madness set in all the same
And I murdered her with a knifie.

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DETECTIVERSE

MORE GRAVE TONES

by JAMES HOLDING

A suicide is here interred—
A fine young man named Johnny Byrd.
He wasn't handsome, wasn't smart,
But he had a warm and loving heart.
He fell for a girl name Anne Louise,
Who caused poor Johnny's sad demise.
For Anne Louise had another suitor
Who gave her a gift of a home computer,
And looked, besides, like a Grecian god
With deep dark eyes and a muscled bod.
Poor Johnny knew he could never compete
With this technological athlete
For Anne Louise, his lady fair,
So he shot himself in sheer despair,
Knowing that he could never suit her
Since she thought her computer suitor cuter.

"Q"

Here lies Herman "The Heister" Krauss,
Killed in the act of robbing a house.
Caught red-handed, he begged for a break,
Said he entered the wrong house by mistake,
Vowed to his captor he'd never deceive him,
But the Doberman watchdog didn't believe him.

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"I have a suspicion," Roger Halsted said, "that the queer things that happen to everybody aren't mystical, but natural."

Take, for instance, the case of this month's banquet guest William Teller's mystifying experience . . .

THE SNATCHED PURSE

by ISAAC ASIMOV

"William Teller!" said Thomas Trumbull, host for that month's banquet of the Black Widowers, announcing the guest of the evening. He did so, however, with a certain trepidation. His frowning glance fixed itself particularly on Mario Gonzalo.

Gonzalo, gorgeously arrayed as usual, this time in his brown-velvet jacket, ignored it. "William Teller," he said delightedly. "Are you a descendant of William Tell, perhaps?"

"Not at all," said Teller agreeably. He had an olive complexion, thick black hair, and a thick black moustache as well. "Actually, William Tell is simply a legend and probably never really existed. However, I'm of Swiss extraction and the first name runs in the family, perhaps in homage to the old fraud. Actually, Teller is an ordinary German word and means 'plate.' But I must admit that when I was young I dreamed of being a superlative archer. I wanted people to say, 'William Tell was good, but William Teller is better.' I was an assiduous archer at summer camp for that reason."

"Did you make it?" asked James Drake with interest, lighting up the inevitable cigarette.

"No. I was remarkably untalented. The only time I ever hit the target, let alone the bull's eye, was when I deliberately aimed at something else. Too bad. If I could have won the national archery

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contest with my name, I would have made every newspaper in the United States—also the Believe It or Not columns."

"You'd have done even better," said Emmanuel Rubin judiciously, "if your name had been Robin Hood."

Roger Halsted said eagerly, "A great many so-called coincidences are manufactured in this way. Someone named Robin Hood would be bound to try his hand at archery, and if he were good saying 'Believe it or not' misses the point. It would be a natural consequence. In fact, I have a suspicion that the queer things that happen to everybody aren't mystical, but natural. For instance—"

No one ever found out the instance Halsted was about to give, for Henry, that waiter supreme, chose that moment to announce in his quietly effective manner that dinner was served.

They sat down to Tripe Madeleine, followed by crisp roast duck in cherry brandy sauce with wild rice and truffles, all of which effectively muffled conversation. In fact, the dinner pursued a kind of satisfied quiet, in which even Rubin's occasional comments were given out with hushed equanimity, until Trumbull, over the coffee, rattled his spoon against the water-glass and appointed Avalon as griller-in-chief.

"Mr. Teller," said Avalon, "how do you justify your existence?"

Teller did not seem to be perturbed by the question. "By making people think."

"And how do you do that?"

"I have a newspaper column called 'On the Contrary.' It doesn't appear in any of the New York newspapers but it does in one hundred and two papers of moderate size elsewhere in the nation. In my column, I present the unpopular side of any controversy—not necessarily because I passionately support that side but because I think it is apt to be inadequately presented to the public. The public may, after all, be misled, even sometimes dangerously misled, by hearing only one side of a question. Many might not even know that another view exists."

"Can you give us an example of that?"

"Certainly. In a recent column I presented the view that so-called terrorists have of themselves."

"So-called?" said Drake, in gentle interrogation.

"Yes, indeed. So-called," said Teller. "They don't think of themselves as terrorists any more than we think of terrorists as such when they're on our side. When we approve their aims, we call them

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freedom fighters and compare them favorably with George Washington."

"Then you defend terrorism?" said Avalon.

"Not necessarily. I merely try to penetrate the reasoning for the defense. For instance, the United States thinks all conflicts should either take place with missiles, planes, tanks, and all the paraphernalia of war—or by votes, resolutions, arguments, debates, and all the paraphernalia of politics. However, what if there are people who feel they have a just cause but who lack the paraphernalia of war and are denied the paraphernalia of politics? What do they do? Surely, they must fight with the weapons they have. Our cry, then, is that they are cowards who strike without warning and kill innocent civilians at random. But is it brave of us to 'fight fair' against forces that are infintely smaller than our own?"

"I see your point," said Rubin, "but terrorism can be argued against on pragmatic grounds. It simply won't work. Random bombings make headlines and cause private pain and public frustration, but they don't achieve their ends."

"Sure they do, on occasion," said Teller. "The Iranian capture of the American Embassy held up the United States to worldwide ridicule, made Khomeini the hero of the Arab radicals throughout Islam, and destroyed the Carter presidency. And they didn't even kill anybody."

"Yes," said Rubin, "but that was self-defeating for it led to the Reagan presidency, which has taken a much harder anti-terrorist line and brought about the bombing of Libya, for instance, as punishment for its support of terrorism."

"But we have yet to see what that will lead to on the other side," Teller said.—"To continue my argument, during war terrorists are called guerrillas or resistance forces or raiders or commandos, and during World War Two such irregular forces in every supposedly conquered nation, notably in Yugoslavia, did much to help defeat the Nazis. Similarly, the guerrillas of Spain did much to defeat Napoleon."

"Perhaps," said Avalon, "you would not be so cold-blooded about it if you had suffered directly at terrorist hands."

"I imagine not, but the argument would exist even if I, out of personal pique, were to refuse to advance it."

Drake chuckled. "You know, Tom, I assume that Mr. Teller is a friend of yours since you've brought him as a guest. Isn't he, with

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his views, a dangerous friend, considering your government employment?"

"Not at all," said Trumbull. "He's just a professional devil's advocate. He often supports the government strongly, provided it has happened to do something unpopular."

Teller said, "True enough." He stopped and frowned, as though a sudden thought had struck him. Then he said, slowly, "You know, this wouldn't have occurred to me if there hadn't been that talk before dinner about odd connections such as that between me and archery, but there's a connection here in the terrorism matter."

"May I ask what connection you're thinking of?" Avalon asked.

"Mr. Avalon just pointed out that my views might change if I were a victim. To be sure, I haven't been, but my wife has, and that might be considered close enough. On the very day my column of terrorism appeared—the very day—my wife was the victim of a mild sort of terrorism. She had her purse snatched. Of course, it was the purest of coincidences, but—" He stopped again.

"Yes, Mr. Teller?" said Avalon.

"Nothing apropos. I was only thinking of the sequel to the incident that was really humorous and even mystifying. But never mind that, let's go to our discussion of my justification for existence. At the time of our misadventure in Lebanon—"

"Wait, wait," said Gonzalo, rattling his spoon on his water glass. "Back up, Mr. Teller. I want to hear about the humorous and mystifying sequel to the purse-snatching."

Teller looked suprised and he turned automatically to Trumbull, "Tom—"

Trumbull shrugged. "Go ahead, tell us about the mystifying sequel. If not, Mario will make life hideous for all of us."

"Wait," said Gonzalo. "Wait one minute. Henry isn't here."

"Henry?" said Teller.

"Our waiter." And Gonzalo raised his voice. "Henry!"

Henry entered the dining room. "Yes, Mr. Gonzalo."

"Don't disappear like that," said Gonzalo peevishly. "Where were you?"

"Disposing of dishes and cutlery, Mr. Gonzalo, but I am at your service now."

"Good. I want you to hear this. Mr. Teller, please start at the beginning."

Teller was staring in surprise. He said, "There really isn't much. My wife was in Grand Central Station, and on a crowded escalator

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her purse vanished. She had it slung over her left shoulder for she was carrying something in each hand, and our guess is that someone behind her carefully cut the strap, held the bag steady till they reached the bottom of the escalator, and then walked rapidly away with the purse under his other arm. She didn't see a thing, she didn't feel a thing. She knows she had the purse in her possession at the top of the escalator—it was there she shoved it toward her back for greater convenience—and she didn't have it when she was at ground level. That's all there is to the story. She wasn't hurt, she wasn't shoved, she wasn't threatened. It was a very professional job."

"You don't seem annoyed," said Gonzalo.

"Well, I was, of course, and so was my wife. Such a loss is always inconvenient. She didn't have much money in it—a few dollars—but she had several credit cards, her driver's license, her automobile registration, some personal papers and photographs, and so on. It meant she had to report the loss of the credit cards and face a few weeks of doing without, or using mine. It meant negotiating with City Hall over her automobile items and apparently saying goodbye to all the junk she had in the purse.

"Mostly, though, it was her pride that was hurt. The purse was an old one—old and decrepit. This was on purpose. She has any number of new and fancy purses that she uses on other occasions, but she used this one on her shopping trips, when she expected to be in crowds. She claimed that no self-respecting thief would dream of taking a purse so disreputable—they would know there was nothing worthwhile in it. Well, they *did* take it, and even though I was careful to make no reference to her earlier statements—she'd always been very smug about her cleverness in this respect—she watched me closely and probably knew what I was thinking."

"And what was the mystifying sequel?" asked Gonzalo.

"Well, yesterday, two days after the snatch, I opened the door of our apartment in order to take the rubbish to the compacter—I work at home—and virtually stumbled over a package which had my wife's name on it in straggling letters. I assumed at first it was something the mailman had left, even though he perfectly well knew he wasn't supposed to do that without ringing the bell. But when I picked it up I found it had no address and no stamps on it. So it must have been hand-delivered—and that rather infuriated me. Our apartment house is supposed to have tight security. No one should be able to get into the elevator without passing inspection by the doorman and having us called on the intercom to get our consent

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to be allowed up. Naturally, this doesn't always work—someone comes in when the doormen are busy with something else, or tails someone who belongs in the house so that he seems to be a guest. But it still infuriated me.

"I was angry enough to inspect the length of the hall and look into the two stairwells and the compacter room—which wasn't exactly intelligent of me. Anyway, I found no one. Then I found my wife, showed her the package, and asked if she knew what it might be.

"She said at once, and with great conviction, 'It's a bomb.' Naturally, I laughed. We're all getting ridiculously terrorist-consicious. Still, though it seemed too small to hold a bomb, I didn't have the nerve to open it. After considerable indecision, listening to it for some telltale tick—although I don't know if bombs tick these days—and smelling it, and not having quite enough courage to shake it, I called the police. They told us to put it in the center of our largest room and leave the apartment. A bomb squad arrived in virtually no time with a portable X-ray unit and, well—it wasn't a bomb.

"They opened the package for us, and when they called us back into the apartment they showed us the contents. Damned if it wasn't what had been stolen from my wife two days before. Everything! The package contained all the papers, including the credit cards, all the junk. It even contained every last bit of money down to the little cache of quarters she kept for public transportation and even a few smaller coins. She counted it in amazement and it was all there. They had taken nothing. Did you ever hear of such a thing? I consider it mystifying. Presumably, it was a thief with an attack of conscience."

Gonzalo, who had listened with close attention, seemed disappointed, "Is that the end of it?"

"The absolute end," said Teller. "But I told you there was nothing much to it, so you mustn't feel annoyed with me."

Gonzalo shook his head, obviously baffled.

Henry, however, said quietly, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Teller, but may I have your permission to ask a question?"

"Well, of course, if you want to, but I don't see what there is to question."

"It's just that you mentioned all the contents, sir, but you didn't mention the purse itself. Was that returned as well?"

Teller looked astonished. "No, it wasn't. I'm glad you asked. It was the only thing that didn't come back. My wife was annoyed

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about that, actually. She said that the purse was valuable to her and they might have returned that, too. My own feeling was that it was simply too bulky to fit into a neat little package. Of course, I pointed out that since her scheme of carrying an old purse hadn't worked, it was no great loss, and she gave me the exasperated look wives always give husbands who descend into mere logic. Anyway, that's it. Everything was returned but the purse."

Halsted said, "That *is* mystifying. They could easily have made a somewhat bigger package. If the thief were sufficiently conscience-stricken to return every last penny, he would certainly have been sufficiently conscience-stricken to return the purse."

Rubin said, "Maybe, since he may have cut the strap, he felt it was useless to return it."

Trumbull said, "Do you suppose there was a purpose in keeping it? I mean, maybe the purse was what they wanted, so they returned everything else."

"Ridiculous," said Rubin. "If they wanted the purse, they could just dump the contents."

Drake stubbed out his cigarette and said in his softly hoarse voice, "We can't have it both ways. Either the thief was not troubled by a conscience and would return nothing, just dumping whatever he didn't want, or else he had a conscience and would return everything except what he absolutely needed. The way I see it is that he was reluctantly stealing something he wanted desperately and he had no intention of stealing anything else."

"You mean," said Avalon, "he was an honest man who had no choice but to steal something he had to have but not another item was going to sully his tender and gentlemanly soul?"

"That's right," said Drake. "Now if that's the case, think it out a bit. He wants to steal a purse in order to get some specific object it contains. But he only sees the purse and nothing else. He doesn't see what's in it. If he wants something it might contain, he can't be sure that this particular purse actually contains it. He might have to steal half a dozen purses, examine each, and then, disappointed of his wish, return everything to its owners. Or if he finally found a purse with what he wanted inside, he would remove the wanted object and return everything else.

"But I don't think an honest man, a man so honest that he would be driven to make a package of what he had taken and run the risk of returning it personally, would steal in so wholesale and cavalier a fashion. If we allow that—"

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"Wait," said Rubin. "We don't necessarily allow that. He might be after what any purse might be thought to contain. Money, credit cards—"

"Or," said Trumbull, "he might have seen Mrs. Teller open her purse and happened to spy something in it that he wanted, and followed her in order to seize the chance of grasping it."

"Or for some reason," said Gonzalo, "all he wanted was her identification—he just wanted to know her name and address."

Drake considered matters a moment, humming under his breath, then he said, "I don't think so. If he wanted money or credit cards, he would have kept them, but he returned them. If he had spied something in the handbag that he wanted but that wasn't intrinsically valuable, he wouldn't have returned *that,* but he did."

"Wait," said Gonzalo, "how can we be sure he returned everything? There might be some little item Mrs. Teller didn't notice was gone. Perhaps there was something in the purse that even she didn't know was there, or had forgotten was there."

"I don't think so," said Teller dubiously. "I can't speak for my wife altogether, but she is a very methodical person with an orderly brain. If she says everything was returned, I'm ready to bet on it."

Avalon cleared his throat and said, "You understand, Mr. Teller, this is a game we're playing. We're trying to work out the implications of this odd event. Please do not be offended, then, when I suggest, merely as a remote possibility, that your wife had, let us say, a letter in her purse that she wanted no one to see. If the thief now has it, and if your wife dare not admit it's gone—"

Teller said grimly, "You're suggesting that the thief now intends to blackmail her. Gentleman, you'll have to assume I know my wife. She would sooner see the blackmailer—and herself—in hell than pay a penny. Please put blackmail right out of your mind."

Halsted said, "He might return the credit cards but keep a record of the number for later forgery. Or of the car registration."

Teller said, "Useless. My wife—like most people who lose these items—immediately cancelled all of them and will eventually have new ones. Forgeries would be unusable."

"What about the identification?" insisted Gonzalo. "He had her name and address, and he didn't have to keep the objects that gave him the information."

"Why on earth," said Trumbull, "would he run the risk of purse-snatching for that? He might simply have followed her home. He might have struck up an acquaintanceship with her somehow. And

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why would he want to know the name and address of a woman unknown to him? You'll excuse me, Bill, if I say that she's not a raving beauty?"

Teller smiled. "She's beautiful to me. But I suppose to anyone else she is a rather ordinary-looking middle-aged woman."

Drake had been looking from one to another as each spoke. He said, "If we've eliminated all the various reasons for stealing a purse and returning the contents, may I be allowed to finish my thought?"

"Go ahead, Jim," said Avalon.

"Very well, then. You've all played about with complexities and, like Henry, I'm going for simplicity. The thief returned everything but the purse. What's more, all he could see at the time he decided to steal something from Mrs. Teller was the purse, not its contents. Conclusion—he was after the purse itself, nothing more, so he returned all it contained."

Rubin said, "But that just substitutes one problem for another. Why should the thief want the purse? —Mr. Teller, are you sure the purse had no intrinsic value."

"None," said Teller emphatically.

"It wasn't an antique of some sort?"

Teller thought a moment. "I'm not an expert on antiques. My wife bought the purse at least twenty years ago, but it's my impression she picked it up at Klein's. Nothing from Klein's would become an antique, would it?"

Gonzalo said, "Mickey Mouse watches, which sold for a dollar apiece to begin with, are now valuable antiques."

"Yes," said Avalon, "but if the man were a collector and recognized that an object might be worth, say, ten thousand dollars, wouldn't he say, 'Pardon me, madam, but your purse reminds me of one my dear dead wife once had. Would you be willing to sell it to me for ten dollars so that I can have it for its sentimental value?' Even if he were driven to theft, he would *try* to get it legally first."

Drake said, "It looks as though we're driven to the conclusion that he wanted the old beat-up purse for its own sake."

"Why?" said Avalon.

Halsted said, "In the story of 'Aladdin,' the wicked sorcerer went about offering to give new lamps for old because he wanted Aladdin's old wishing lamp."

Avalon favored Halsted with a haughty stare. "I think we can eliminate the possibility that Mrs. Teller owned a wishing purse."

"Just joking," said Halsted.

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"Maybe the thief was a theatrical director who needed an old purse for a play he was doing," said Gonzalo.

"Nuts," said Rubin with contempt. "There are thrift shops all over the city. Or he could simply buy a new one and scuff it up."

Trumbull said, "That eliminates the whole need for anyone to steal an old beat-up purse."

The conversation came to a dead halt. Finally, Avalon said, "I think we've beat this to death. There's no logical explanation, and we may simply have to admit that people do illogical things sometimes and let it go."

"Oh, no," said Gonzalo, "not until Henry has his say.—Henry, what do you make of all this?"

Henry smiled gently and said, "I think, as Mr. Avalon does, that people sometimes do illogical things. However, if we want to continue to play the game, there is one occasion when stealing an old purse is more effective than buying a purse, old or new."

"When is that, Henry?" asked Teller.

"When the thief wants to make sure he is not identified. If a purse is bought, it's conceivable that something about it can lead investigators to the place where it was purchased and the seller can conceivably identify the person who bought it. In this case, the thief wasn't seen and cannot conceivably be identified. Even if it's traced back to Mrs. Teller, she cannot make an identification. The thief may be so honest that he takes the risk of returning everything else, careful to use a nondescript box and paper for a package, wearing gloves, scrawling simply the owner's name on it, and quietly delivering it without being seen so that he is still not likely to be identified."

"But in that case," said Teller, "he would want the purse for a criminal purpose."

"One would suppose so," said Henry.

"Like what?"

"Still playing the game," said Henry, "I can invent a purpose—farfetched, but making a weird kind of sense. The purse was stolen in Grand Central Station. It is well known that there are homeless people who live in the station, generally left alone by a society that is too callous to go too far out of its way to help them, but not so callous as to evict them from a warm and secure place.

"No one pays much attention to these derelicts. The average person tends to avert his eyes from these sad individuals, if only because they look dirty and miserable so that the onlooker feels uncomfort-

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ably repelled or uncomfortably conscience-stricken. It would be easy for someone to assume the dirt, the old clothes, and the wretched appearance of a homeless person and count on not being interfered with, or even noticed. Suppose, then, a woman were made up as what is called a bag lady and needed a purse to carry off the deception?"

Gonzalo interrupted. "Hold on, you call them bag ladies because they carry their personal belongings in shopping bags."

"That is likely to be the origin of the term," said Henry, "but it has become a generic word for such derelicts. I am sure that a homeless woman with an old purse would still be considered a bag lady."

Teller laughed. "Very clever tale-spinning, Henry, but I don't think my wife would take to the notion that she carried a purse suitable for a bag lady. Why would this disguised bag lady need a purse, anyway? Why not a shopping bag?"

"Perhaps," said Henry, "because a shopping bag would not be strong enough to contain whatever the bag lady was carrying—only a sturdy but old purse would do. For instance—and this thought occurs to me only because of the earlier discussion of terrorism—what if the supposed bag lady were carrying an explosive device she planned to place in the station so as to do a great deal of damage? As Mr. Teller has pointed out, terrorists may look upon themselves as lofty and noble patriots. They would steal a purse that was absolutely essential to their needs, if stealing were the safest way to obtain it, but they would scorn to keep the contents. They are not thieves, but patriots—in their own eyes, at least."

Gonzalo said admiringly, "Good Lord, Henry, how nicely you make it all fit."

"Simply a game, sir. Dr. Drake did the real work."

Trumbull said, frowning darkly as he passed his hand over his tightly waved white hair, "You make it all fit *too* nicely, Henry. Is there a chance this is what really happened?"

"I scarcely think so, Mr. Trumbull," said Henry. "There has been no report of an explosion anywhere in the city."

"It's only three days since the purse was stolen," said Trumbull. He turned to Teller. "I don't suppose your wife reported the theft, did she?"

"No. She couldn't make any identification, not the slightest. She might as well say the purse had disappeared by the wave of an enchanter's wand."

"Even if she had," said Avalon, "what could the police do about

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it, Tom? And why should they think anything like the story Henry has dreamed up. That only arose out of the fact that everything was returned yesterday."

"And I don't suppose you reported that, either, did you, Bill?" asked Trumbull.

"No, of course not," said Teller.

"Well," said Trumbull, rising heavily to his feet. "This may be crazy, but I'm going to call someone I know. And if—" he looked at his watch "—I catch him watching television or getting ready for bed, that's just too bad."

He left for the telephone in the next room, while the remaining Black Widowers and their guest remained in an uneasy silence. Only Henry seemed unperturbed.

Gonzalo said, "Do you really think there might be something to what you've thought up, Henry?"

Henry said, "We had better simply wait for Mr. Trumbull to return."

He did, eventually. He sat down and for perhaps fifteen seconds simply stared at Henry.

"Well, Tom?" said Avalon.

Tom said, "It amounts to this. If ever this gets out, Henry is going to be indicted for witchcraft."

Henry's eyebrows lifted slightly. "If you mean by that, sir, that there *was* a bomb, I think it would be more appropriate to give the credit to the logical minds of the Black Widowers."

"Of *you,* Henry," said Trumbull. "There was indeed a bomb," he said. "It was placed in a spot where it would perhaps not have caused much in the way of casualties but it would certainly have disrupted train service for weeks. —What's more, it was contained in an old leather purse."

"But," said Henry, "there was no explosion, I take it."

"No, because the purse was discovered, quite by accident, and the person who saw it lifted it and was surprised by its weight. Then, because these are troubled times, it occurred to him to do precisely the right thing—he called the bomb squad."

"That's luck," said Gonzalo. "If it hadn't been found, Henry's analysis would have come too late."

"It's not too late for everything. I'm afraid I told them enough of the story so that your wife is going to have to go and identify her purse, Bill. If it *is* her purse, and I'm ready to bet my last year's salary it is, then they know something important the terrorists don't

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know they know. They'll start looking at the derelicts in the station and they might well find something. Thank You, Henry."

Teller looked perturbed. "I don't think Jenny is going to enjoy getting involved with this."

Trumbull said, "She has no choice. Just tell her she's got to."

"Yes, that's easy for you to say," said the troubled Teller.

Henry said, "Take heart, Mr. Teller. I'm sure that your professional ability to uphold unpopular points of view in a convincing manner will make it possible for you to accomplish the task with ease."

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5 *EQMM* CONTRIBUTORS JUSTIFY THEIR EXISTENCE

To celebrate publication of Isaac Asimov's 55th Black Widowers story—not all of them published in *EQMM*, but we did launch the series with "The Acquisitive Chuckle" in the January 1972 issue—we asked several major *EQMM* contributors, including Dr. Asimov, if they would respond to the Widowers' monthly question, "How do you justify your existence?" for publication. We received the following replies—and a surprising range of thought they represent.

Isaac Asimov

How do I justify my existence?

Well—

By my writing, I amuse people and make them happy. My writing style is simple, straightforward, and upbeat; nothing nasty or horrid or violent or perverse. In this sad world, I think that anyone who spreads happiness automatically justifies his existence. Nor do I feel guilty that I am not delving into the garbage and muck of human life. There are lots of authors who do that, so why should I crowd into the muck with them?

Janwillem van de Wetering

Am I justified?

Turn back time, ask me again, and I'd be shouting at you: Of course! We are, therefore we are justified! Let nature, the world, heaven, the void, all and everything, bow down and pay homage! To who? To me!

But now we're all older and wiser. Did we make a million—spiritually or in the bank? If so, did it matter? It probably did but it doesn't justify much of anything. If we're still around on our own, we're still wondering about the wonder. And cursing, thanking, analyzing, and abusing the wonder.

And as long as I won't slip into the wonder myself, the wonder will never tell me what it is. Or justify me to justify its existence.

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Robert Twohy

Artistically. I'm a grey dot in a painting by Seurat, important as any other dot as we're all in this together, making the big picture.

As a grey dot, I influence the dots adjacent, or at least influence perception of them—they seem to sparkle more, which affects *their* neighbors, and so on, across the canvas.

If Seurat decides to make a change and rubs me out, that's his business, not mine. My life isn't my business. I'm on the canvas as long as he wants me on it—if he wants to try a blue or another color in my tiny area, I'm gone.

I don't justify my existence, I celebrate it, as long as it lasts. I believe there's a point to it which I don't have to know.

Maybe there isn't. Maybe Seurat is a nut, out of his skull on absinthe, who doesn't know what the hell he's doing—

But he makes great paintings and I'm glad to be in this one, doing for it whatever I do.

William Bankier

Q: How do you justify your existence?

A. In the same manner as the Monarch butterfly. My physical appearance is so pleasing that people are made happy just to see me coming. The mood of any gathering is enhanced by my arrival. But unlike the butterfly, whose life-span is ephemeral, I have been fluttering for fifty-eight years. And my loveliness increases, although, admittedly, it will one day pass into nothingness.

Q: The truth of your claim is beyond dispute. How do you maintain such a delightful appearance, given the corrosive nature of the writer's life?

A. I must first praise my mother and father (and their ancestors) who made me, in the truest sense, what I am today. That said, the secret is purity of thought and deed governed by moderation and regularity in all behavior. Yet even this is not enough. Without a truly modest and humble nature, my attractiveness would be little more than a facade.

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"Major Gilbert," said Geoffrey Avalon, "as host this evening it is my privilege to cross-examine you. By the way, was I correct in addressing you by your military title? I don't recollect that you use it."

"Only on such occasions as regimental reunions."

"As rarely as you call yourself 'doctor,' " said Rubin.

"Overlooking that uncalled-for interruption—by tradition our first question is to ask how you justify your existence."

"In my youth I played a good deal of Rugby football. A game related to, though not as scientific as your code. At the dinner which concluded each season, it was customary to serenade any newcomer with a song—I won't attempt to sing it to you—which concluded, 'Why was he born so beautiful? Why was he born at all?' "

"A difficult question to answer," agreed Gonzalo, "since such evidence as you have on this point must necessarily be second-hand."

"I agree. It is only when you reach such a respectable age as I have—seventy-five on my next birthday—that you can look back to assess whether you have any solid achievement to your credit."

"It will be in the field of writing, of course," said Rubin.

"Or the law," suggested Avalon, who looked on writing as a second-best pursuit.

"Or possibly," said Trumbull, "some facet of your military career."

"No. I'm afraid that I cannot claim outstanding credit in any of these matters. I have, however, one achievement which is, I think, unusual, and of which I am proud. I have produced seven normal and agreeable children."

"Define your terms," said Avalon.

"By normal I mean only that they have not shown any signs of abnormality. By agreeable, that although they are sometimes rude to me they are never rude to their mother."

The Black Widowers considered the claim seriously. James Drake, who had not previously spoken, said, "If one reckons it as an even chance whether a child will be creditable or disastrous, I am inclined to agree that to have pulled this off seven times favorably is considerably against the odds. I imagine they would be calculated mathematically as one hundred twenty-eight to one."

"You make the mistake of all amateur mathematicians," said Halsted. "You ignore the frequency reduction factor. You agree, Henry?"

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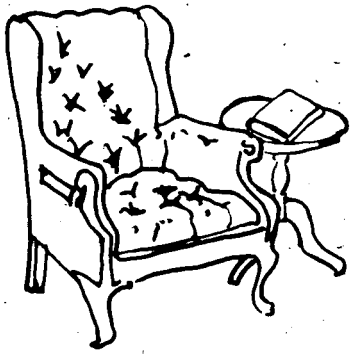
"I should imagine," said Henry, coming forward with the bottle, "that the odds are as lengthy as that any grape would, after twenty-five years, produce the excellent brandy you are about to enjoy. May I fill your glass, Major?"



DETECTIVERSE

WOODEN YOU KNOW?

by JOAN D. ROSSO.

Matt McHenry is a mountain man,
Mean and ugly since his life began,
Whiskey and women every night—
Poor wife's home, out of sight.

Effie sits and rocks when the sun goes down,
All alone while he's in town—
No telephone, no radio,
No phonograph, no TV show.

Tonight she'll wait behind the door
And bash his head with a two-by-four.
No more whiskey on his breath—
Coroner's verdict: board to death.

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a *NEW* short story by

ANNA CLARKE

Lucy was small and rather simple—not very pretty, but with trusting dark eyes and a sweet smile—and she worked in the kitchen of the big mental hospital two miles away from the park. She would not believe that Bobby would never come here again. He was her first love, and Saturday evening had become a beacon light casting its warmth and radiance over the drab days ahead . . .

THE SECRET PATH

by ANNA CLARKE

They reached the park bench at the same moment, the elderly man and the young girl. It stood in a quiet corner of the park, where the neat lawns and the clipped hedges came to an end. Beyond the bench were the woods.

The man came along one of the narrow paths between the birch trees; the girl had come past the tennis courts and the bowling greens, where players and spectators were enjoying the September sunshine, and she had walked on and on, up the grassy slope.

She had not expected to find anybody here, for the bench was seldom occupied during daylight hours. The old people did not like to walk so far, and even the middle-aged widows, of whom there were many visiting the park, avoided this area. Some months ago there had been a murder in the woods. A young woman from the nearby housing estate was found strangled and the police seemed to be just as far as ever from discovering who was to blame.

Only lovers seeking privacy made their way to this corner of the park. Sometimes they paused for a while at the bench, but more

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often they wandered on into the woods, as the girl, whose name was Lucy, had done every Saturday evening for the past two months.

Except for last week, when he did not come.

She would not believe that he would never come again. He was her first love, and Saturday evening had become a beacon light casting its warmth and radiance over the drab days ahead.

Last week he must have been ill. Or perhaps on some important errand, for he had told her that his work was very secret and that was why he could not tell her where he lived.

She was small and rather simple—not very pretty, but with trusting dark eyes and a sweet smile—and she worked in the kitchen of the big mental hospital two miles away from the park.

When the elderly man came out of the woods, Lucy's eyes were so dazzled by the slanting afternoon sun and her heart was so full of longing that at first she did not realize it was a stranger.

"Bobby!" she cried. "Where were you last week?"

Then she saw that it was not Bobby and the disappointment was like death. She reached out blindly for the end of the park bench and sat down on it, covering her face with her hands. The man seated himself at the other end of the bench. He had a thin pale face and thick grey hair and small, keen-looking blue eyes. He wore white trousers and a navy-blue blazer, like the men playing bowls down below in the center of the park.

Presently he spoke. "Nice weather for this time of year."

He had a pleasant, cultured voice.

Lucy took her hands from her face and glanced along the bench. She did not like being spoken to by strangers. Even before Bobby had warned her, she knew she had to be careful, but at this moment she was so miserable she really didn't care whether she got murdered or not. To lie on the dead leaves in the damp woods could hardly be worse than to go on and on in this dreary tunnel of living with no shining beacon light at the end of it.

"It's nice in the sunshine," she said.

"Do you often come here?" asked the man.

"Sometimes," she muttered, glancing round to see whether perhaps Bobby was lurking at the edge of the woods and not coming nearer because she was not alone.

There was no sign of him. He is not coming, she said to herself, and I ought to move, because it's not safe to be here alone with this strange man—but she didn't move because her limbs were too heavy and tired.

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"You care for him very much," the stranger was saying in a low, soft voice. "It is very painful when one first loves."

Lucy tried again to get up from the bench, but the tears were stirring in her, and they felt like drops of lead. And then, she did not know how or why, she found she was telling the strange man all about Bobby—how she had first met him when she was helping a lame woman off the bus before getting on herself, how they had traveled into town together and got friendly, how they met in the park because she didn't want anybody at the hospital to know about him. They would be jealous or else they would sneer at her. And he didn't want anybody at his lodgings to know about her because they were all old people who didn't understand young people at all.

So nobody else knew.

"Nobody?" put in the stranger at this point. "Nobody knows you are here this afternoon?"

"Nobody," repeated Lucy firmly. And then: "Except—"

"Except?" prompted the stranger, leaning toward her from his end of the bench and frowning slightly as he looked at her.

"Except Bobby," said Lucy faintly. "He'll know I'm here waiting for him."

"I see," said the stranger, and leaned back in his corner again.

For a minute or two there was silence. Lucy found a handkerchief and wiped her eyes, and the man turned his head round to face the woods—and remained thus, ears and eyes on the alert, until Lucy spoke.

"He won't come now," she said. "It's much too late."

"Perhaps he's waiting in the woods," said the man. "Didn't you have a favorite spot?"

"Oh, yes." Lucy's voice trembled. The thought of the grassy bank under the silver birch trees nearly made her cry again.

"Wouldn't you like to go and see?" suggested the man. "It would be a pity to miss him if he's waiting for you there."

Lucy looked doubtful. She had never ventured into the woods by herself: only with Bobby.

The man seemed to read her thoughts. "If I go with you," he said, "you will be quite safe."

Lucy stood up. Her legs felt better now. It had helped to talk to somebody about Bobby; it made him seem alive, more real, not just a dream. And she didn't think this man could be dangerous. After all, he was quite old and he was dressed like all the other old men who crowded round the bowling greens. And he had listened to her

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with sympathy, which was something very few people did. She would like to see the silver birch trees round the grassy bank again, even if Bobby wasn't there. They were full of happy memories.

So they got up from the park bench. She walked round her end of it, and he walked round his, and they came together where the lawn ended. Because the path was narrow, and stinging nettles and bramble bushes grew along the sides, they walked single file, the man going first and Lucy following a few feet behind.

"Which way do we go now?" he asked as they came out into a little clearing, with several narrow paths leading away into denser woodland.

"Oh," she said almost brightly, as if she was flirting with him, "that was our secret. Bobby's and mine. I'll show you."

The branches of the holly bush grew close to the ground, but Lucy walked toward them. Next to the holly grew a young sycamore, and she pushed aside the twigs nearest the spiky holly to reveal a way through the undergrowth.

The man followed her. Every now and then they stood quite still, listening to the rustle of leaves and the little frightened chirrups of the birds they had disturbed.

"Bobby won't make a sound if he's here," whispered Lucy.

"I don't expect he will," replied the man.

"He knows the woods very well," she boasted.

"I expect he does. So do I."

"But you didn't know our secret path," said Lucy, speaking more loudly and on a note of triumph.

"I didn't know it was *your* secret path," he said quietly.

Lucy found this puzzling, as she found so many things puzzling that people said, so she walked on, carefully pushing aside the long trailing strands of the brambles and trampling the shorter ones underfoot.

At last they came to the precious place. Little slivers of sunlight glinted on the leaves of the birches and on the long grass underneath.

"He isn't here," said Lucy. "There's nobody here."

She crouched down on the soft bright grass and passed her hand over it tenderly. A lovely place to lie—place to die. To lie—to die—

The two words, sounding so alike, repeated themselves over and over in her mind, making her more confused than ever.

"Does Bobby smoke Rothman cigarettes?" asked her companion.

"Yes. How did you know?" asked Lucy, getting up and turning to face him.

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The man did not reply. He was looking not at Lucy, but back toward the trees, his head moving slowly from side to side and his right hand deep in the pocket of his loose blue blazer.

"How did you know?" asked Lucy again.

"It has been one of the main clues during our murder investigations," replied the man, looking at her very intently.

"Oh." Lucy repeated the words to herself. Murder investigations. At first they didn't seem to make sense, and then suddenly she understood. Simple Lucy, who understood so little, suddenly saw it all very clearly, as if somebody had switched on a light in a dark room.

"I see you have realized who your Bobby is," said her companion. "You have been lucky. Other girls have not been so fortunate. I know it is very painful for you, but we would like you to help us. You wouldn't want there to be any more victims, would you?"

"No," said Lucy, shaking her head as she continued to face the grassy bank. "Are you a policeman?"

"Here is my identification," said the man, taking a card from the blazer pocket and showing it to Lucy. "I promise you will be in no danger. I am going to conceal myself, but I shall be watching every second, and I am armed. You will come to no harm. Now what I want you to do—"

He broke off as Lucy suddenly rushed at him and began to beat at his chest with clenched hands. "You're going to shoot Bobby!" she cried. "I won't help you—I won't! I don't care what he's done, I love him—I love him!"

"Stop that at once," said the man in the sharp voice of authority. "Be quiet."

Lucy let her hands fall to her sides. Her screams died down into a steady whimpering, like that of an injured dog. "I don't want to help you catch Bobby," she muttered. "I'm not going to stay here."

"All right then, we can't force you. But don't forget that whatever happens will be all your own fault."

Lucy, sobbing, made no reply. Blindly, she reached out for the tree that marked the path out of the secret place. A bramble tore at her leg. She kicked at it impatiently, tripped, and fell against the birch bark. It felt crisp and comforting. She put an arm round the tree, turned her face to the bark, and wept without restraint.

"You'd much better stay here and do what I ask," said the voice of authority.

Lucy raised her head. Perhaps it was because she had been crying

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so much that her vision was blurred, or perhaps the policeman really did look different. The face that had up till now been so pale and calm looked red and twisted, and then suddenly there was more red in front of her eyes, like a scarlet curtain. It came nearer and nearer till it touched her throat—soft, silky stuff—and as it came round her throat she screamed.

"Bobby!"

The man let her go very suddenly and she fell back into a holly bush. Its thorns scratched her arms. She thought at first they were covered in blood, they were so red, but then she saw that there was only a faint trickle, and the red was the silky stuff that had got twisted round her wrist.

At the same moment she heard twigs and branches snapping as if somebody was trampling through the undergrowth. Such a noise. Like an army invading the wood. And shooting. Very loud. Very near. Lucy crouched down by the trunk of the birch tree. Then the shooting stopped and the trampling stopped and the wood was once more silent save for the birds and the insects and the rustling leaves.

What had happened? Where was the old man who was not a policeman at all, but a strangler? And who had been shooting?

Lucy knew that she ought to go and fetch somebody with authority, but she felt so giddy she sat down on the grassy bank and held her head in her hands.

Very softly somebody spoke her name. Twice.

At first she thought she was dreaming and then she opened her eyes and knew it was true.

Bobby had come at last. He sat beside her and put an arm round her and said very gently: "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"It's better now," she whispered. "Now that you've come."

She turned to look at Bobby. He was different somehow. Not calm and steady as he had always been before, but out of breath and almost frightened-looking.

"Where is he?" she asked. "That old man. Did he try to kill you, too?"

Bobby laughed—not happily, but nervously. "Here, take the gun," he said. "Hide it in your room. Nobody will look for it there."

He pulled the red silk from Lucy's wrist, wrapped it round the hard metal, and slipped it into the pocket of her coat.

"You hide it for me, Lucy," he said. "You haven't told anybody about me, have you?"

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"Only the old man."

"You told him?"

"I'm sorry, Bobby. He seemed so interested."

"I bet he did," said Bobby grimly. "But it doesn't matter now. He's dead."

Suddenly he stood up, pulled Lucy to her feet, and hugged her. "We've done it, little Luce. You and me together. We've got the man who killed my wife." And he swung her round and round in a dance of triumph.

"You and me," repeated Lucy in a daze when they came to a halt. "You never told me you had a wife."

"I haven't. Not now. The bastard strangled her."

"Oh." Lucy began to understand at last. "The girl who was murdered was your wife. But if you found out who killed her, why didn't you tell the police?"

"Because he'd have got off. Life sentence! What's the use of that? I wanted him dead." He stared at her. "Can't you understand that, Lucy?"

He was pleading with her now, this Bobby who was just as she had known him and who was yet so different.

"Yes," she replied. "I can understand. If anybody were to kill you I should want to kill them."

"Oh, Lucy." He hugged her again. "You're such a good brave girl and I've been so mean to you. Letting you risk your life. But I was watching all the time," he added quickly. "You were quite safe, really."

Lucy wasn't listening. She was thinking hard. She had never thought so hard and so clearly in her life.

"You shot the old man who killed your wife," she said. "Where is he now?"

"Back there." Bobby jerked his head over his shoulder.

"And you knew he would try to kill me if I came here alone?"

She drew back a little as she said this, but kept her eyes on his face. It seemed to her that he was very nervous now—no longer the strong and confident Bobby sho loved so much, but anxious and afraid.

Afraid of what she, Lucy, might say or do.

"So you never cared for me at all," she said wistfully.

"I—I'm very grateful to you," he stammered.

"But you didn't care for me," she insisted. "You only pretended to."

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She saw impatience in him then, mixed with his fear, and a flash of anger, too. It was as if, with this new understanding that had come to her, she could see right into his thoughts.

"I did care about you," he muttered, not looking at her. "That's why I came back to see if you were all right. I didn't have to, did I?" he added, taking her by the shoulders and smiling as he always used to smile. "I might have run away, or I might have—"

He broke off, and she was just about to raise her face for a kiss as she always used to when the warning bell sounded in her mind.

"What else might you have done, Bobby?" she asked softly.

His hands moved toward her neck, encircled it lightly for a moment, and then let go.

"But you didn't," said Lucy in a much more determined manner. "You told me you'd shot him and gave me your gun to hide."

"I was a fool to trust you," he said angrily.

"Oh, no, Bobby. You did quite right. It shows that you do love me. A little. That's enough to start with, and I won't give you away. But you must write to me every week until it's safe for us to meet again."

Secret letters, she added happily to herself—almost as good as a secret meeting place.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In Dawson that summer of '98, a gold nugget—and more often gold dust—was the common currency, and there were professional gamblers like those at the Golden Nugget to grab as much of it as they could. What was left in the prospectors' pockets usually went for supplies, in an economy where a plate of ham and eggs could cost $3.50. Although dance-hall girls frequented the saloons, the Northwest Mounted Police did their best to keep the prostitutes across the river in an area variously called Louse Town or Paradise Alley. It was reached by a rope bridge not far from the point where the Klondike River branched off from the Yukon . . .

POKER GAME AT THE GOLDEN NUGGET

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Ben Snow reached for the freshly dealt cards and picked them up carefully. It wasn't the sort of game where one made quick moves that could be misconstrued. Glancing around at the other five players, he decided he had never seen a more unsavory group of men in one place, and that included Dodge City at its worst.

The poker game in the back room at the Golden Nugget had been going on, some said, since the saloon opened the previous summer in one of the wooden shacks that had gone up almost overnight along the main street in Dawson. The saloon was well named because in that summer of '98 gold nuggets were as acceptable a currency as silver dollars in the bars and sporting houses of the Yukon Territory.

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Most places had small scales for weighing and evaluating nuggets on the spot.

Ben Snow hadn't traveled north to prospect for gold. He'd come as something of a paid bodyguard to a prospector named Race Johnson, who knew a great deal about panning for gold but very little about gunfighting. Even at the age of 38, Ben's reputation with a six-shooter was as firm as ever. People rarely mistook him for Billy the Kid as they had in his younger days, but they still came to him when there was need of a keen mind and a fast gun.

The journey north with Race Johnson had begun in the early spring, a full year after the first wave of the gold rush started. They'd sailed from San Francisco on a tramp steamer jammed to the gunwales with gold-seekers, following the inside channel through the Alaska islands to Skagway. From there it was a back-breaking journey north to Dawson, starting with a rocky portage over the Chilkoot Pass for which they hired Indians to assist them.

Already some of their fellow passengers were turning back, their meager funds exhausted. After the portage of twenty-five miles, Johnson and Ben had to hire a boat for the journey across Lake Linderman to the headwaters of the Yukon River. Dawson was still more than two hundred miles downriver and it wasn't a pleasant voyage. Ben would have preferred a bucking horse to the rapids they encountered.

It was June when they finally reached Dawson, steering the boat between the occasional ice floes that were a reminder of the hard winter too recently departed. They had camped along the way in abandoned cabins or on the boat itself, seeing fewer and fewer people the farther north they went. That was why the first sight of Dawson itself came as something of a shock. It was a city of tents and shacks, its population mushroomed in a year's time to nearly fifty thousand people. Its muddy main street was lined with saloons like the Golden Nugget, in which the prospectors ate and drank, bought their provisions, and spent a few hours with hard-eyed sporting ladies. Most saloons even rented rooms by the week or month.

A gold nugget—and more often gold dust—was the common currency, and there were professional gamblers like those at the Golden Nugget to grab as much of it as they could. What was left in the prospectors' pockets usually went for supplies, in an economy where a plate of ham and eggs could cost $3.50.

Although dance-hall girls frequented the saloons, the Northwest Mounted Police did their best to keep the prostitutes across the river

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in an area variously called Louse Town or Paradise Alley. It was reached by a rope bridge not far from the point where the Klondike River branched off from the Yukon. A better bridge for wagons and horses was a mile upriver.

Race and Ben quickly learned of two important events which had occurred during their eight-week journey. On April 25th the United States Congress had declared war on Spain. And of more immediate importance, on June 13th the Yukon Territory had joined the Canadian Confederation.

It was Sam Wellman, owner of the Golden Nugget, who explained the importance of this action to them. "This place is like the end of the world, and until now we were our own law. With this Confederation business, the Mounted Police have more power. They're corralling prostitutes and even arresting some of the gamblers. Dawson will never be the same."

"Even a town at the end of the world has to have laws," Ben pointed out.

Sam Wellman was a big man who liked to make his own laws. He pointed angrily.

"I've had a poker game going in the back room ever since I opened a year ago. They gonna tell me to close it down?"

Race Johnson had his own rules as well. "Look here, Sam—if these Mounties are anything like the cops back home, a few dollars or some gold dust will have them looking the other way."

Wellman was inclined to agree. "But you get all sorts. There's a Sergeant Baxter in charge here and I haven't quite figured him out. If I offered him a little money he might take it. Or he might lock me up for attempted bribery. When I figure out which, I'll know what to do."

Sam Wellman rarely sat in on his never-ending poker game. Ben didn't, either, at first. But it soon became obvious that there was little point in accompanying Johnson to the creek every day. Dawson's diversions were limited to women, booze, and cards, and after considering those possibilities Ben started sitting in on the game.

The prospectors who gambled were mostly the newcomers, those who hadn't yet made the acquaintance of the professional cardsharps like Yancy Booth who made their living off them. Of the five men grouped around the table with Ben the first evening in early July, he had to admit Yancy was the most respectable in appearance, with a string tie and black coat that would have made a banker proud. Still, after a few days of poker with him, Ben knew him to be totally

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ruthless. After he wiped out a tough-looking prospector named Grogan, winning everything the man possessed and reducing him to actual tears, Ben decided he'd had enough for the night.

As he left the table, a bar girl named Tess approached him. "Want to try your luck at my place, Mister?"

"Where would that be?" Ben sat down on a bar stool.

"Across the river in Paradise Alley."

"I don't trust that bridge."

She laughed and slapped his knee. "I'll carry you across."

"Have a drink with me and I'll think about it."

"Fair enough. Give me a whiskey, Pete."

The bartender's name was Pete Waters and Ben knew he kept a shotgun behind the bar. He wondered if it had ever been used.

"Here you are," Pete said, sliding the whiskey down to Tess.

"How long you been here?" Ben asked the girl. She was prettier than some of the others, with dark hair that framed a soft, inquisitive face.

"I came up last August. It's been almost a year."

"How are the winters here?"

"Cold, but not as snowy as you'd expect. We only had about fifty inches of snow all this winter. I'm used to more than that back in the States. But you can get a frost here in late August, and they last till early June. Summer's nice—usually in the sixties like today—but it's too short."

"You like it here at the Nugget?"

She shrugged. "Sam's good to me. All the bars got their own girls and most don't like outsiders floating around. I been watching you. How come you're not out panning for gold with the rest of them?" she asked.

"I'm here with Race Johnson. You might say I'm his traveling companion," Ben explained.

That brought a short, sharp laugh from Tess. "Bodyguard, you mean. Or hired gunfighter. How's he doing?"

"He brought in a small nugget yesterday."

"He should go farther up the Klondike, toward Bonanza Creek. That's where the first gold was found two summers ago. There are lots of little cabins up there he could use."

"He might do that, but then I'd have to go with him. I prefer staying in Dawson if I can, at least for now."

She took that as an opening to renew her invitation. "Sure you don't want to come over to Paradise Alley with me? If you're gonna

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stay in Dawson for the winter you'll need a warm place when the temperature hits twenty below."

"That's all the persuasion I needed," Ben said.

She grinned, happy with her conquest. "You can buy a bottle of whiskey from Pete to bring along if you want."

"Sounds like a fine idea."

There was still plenty of daylight left in the long northern summer and Ben followed her across the rope bridge without difficulty. Paradise Alley was composed of a number of wooden shacks built close together.

Several young women called out to Tess as they arrived and one came to meet them.

"Tess, we're having a whiskey party for the boys on Sunday afternoon. You gonna be in on it?"

"Sure, why not? Mary, this here's Ben Snow. He's only been in Dawson a few weeks."

Mary was a plain young woman in her early twenties, running a bit to fat. "Hi, Ben. Welcome to Dawson. Is this your first visit to Paradise?"

"The first time I could face the trip across that bridge."

"Now that you know the way, come to the party on Sunday."

"I will," Ben promised.

He brought Race Johnson with him on Sunday afternoon, and they discovered that a whiskey party in Paradise Alley was something like a tea party back home. The sporting ladies were dressed in their finest duds, complete with straw hats, sailor caps, and a variety of other headgear. Tables had been arranged outside the shacks, and glasses and whiskey bottles were much in evidence. A few of the ladies held pets, little puppies or a cat, and one had a half grown Eskimo husky.

The past few days had been good ones for Johnson. He'd ended the week with a handful of gold nuggets that would bring several thousand dollars. Ben decided he'd have to stick closer to him if he meant to earn his pay. This was especially true at the Sunday whiskey party, which attracted the sort of motley crowd usually found around the poker table at the Golden Nugget. When Ben came upon Yancy Booth sipping whiskey with Tess's friend Mary he even felt compelled to ask, "Who's at the poker game this afternoon?"

Yancy gave an unamused laugh. "When I left, Pete Waters was sittin' in with that crybaby Grogan and a couple of strangers."

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"Where'd Grogan get the money? I thought you wiped him out the other night."

"Who knows? He probably panned some gold dust out of the river."

Toward evening, the party started growing boisterous. Race Johnson had gone into a shack with one of the girls and Ben figured he had to stay to see him safely back to their room at the Golden Nugget.

Unfortunately, the noise attracted a pair of Mounted Police, who rode up on horseback. The older of the two wore sergeant's stripes and Ben guessed correctly that he was the Sergeant Baxter he'd been hearing about.

"You there!" the Mountie shouted, getting down from his horse and motioning to Ben. "I don't think I've seen you before—what's your name?"

"Ben Snow."

"I'm Sergeant Baxter. Where are you from?"

"The States. San Francisco, most recently."

"When did you arrive?"

"Third week in June."

The sergeant took out a notebook. "Let me have your gun."

"I—"

"Let me have it—I'm not in the habit of asking twice!"

Baxter's weathered face was one that meant business, and he had another Mountie backing him up. Ben shrugged and handed over his revolver.

The sergeant checked to see that it was fully loaded, then made a note of the serial number and Ben's name. "What's that for?" Ben asked.

"My own private gun-registration system. With this many people around, all carrying weapons, I need some way to keep the peace. This helps a little." He handed the six-shooter back. "Carrying anything else? A boot Derringer, maybe?"

"No."

"All right. Keep your nose clean, Mr. Snow, and you won't have any trouble from me."

Baxter walked away, leading his horse, no doubt seeking other unfamiliar faces.

Ben found Race Johnson just coming out of the shack. "Good party," Race commented with a grin. "A nice way to relax on a Sunday."

"I got stopped by that Mountie—Baxter."

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"I heard he's been around. They patrol up the river, too. I guess no one can complain. It's a pretty open town."

Ben sometimes thought it was the lure of adventure, of open gambling and sex, that brought Johnson north as much as the promise of gold. He'd told Ben once that he came from a wealthy family. It was Ben's mention of the endless poker game at the Golden Nugget that finally drew Race in as a participant. His gold-hunting luck continued good by day, and perhaps he thought some of it would rub off on the evening game. Ben sat in with him on Tuesday and Wednesday of that week, watching him draw reasonably good cards and win a few nuggets and some cash from the other players.

On Thursday, the stakes went up with the appearance of Yancy Booth for the first time that week. No one knew exactly where he'd been since Sunday's party. Some said he'd fallen in love with one of the girls in Paradise Alley, but no one took that too seriously. In any event he was back, and his presence was immediately reflected in the amount of money riding on each pot. Race and Ben were in the game that night, along with Grogan and the bartender, Pete Waters. Tess wasn't around, but her friend Mary perched on a bar stool to watch. And even Sam Wellman came out of his office a couple of times when the table became especially noisy—or quiet—with excitement.

Race started out in a bad mood, having himself had a run-in with Sergeant Baxter. But he got over it when he was dealt three aces and won a fair-sized pot. The action continued like that for a couple of hours. Ben noticed that Yancy was losing heavily, but didn't think much of it until the man's mood started turning sour. He began slamming his hand on the table and tossing his cards haphazardly. Ben hadn't seen this side of him before, and it hardly seemed in keeping with his reputation as a professional gambler.

Once at the end of a hand, he came close to accusing Race of having cheated and Ben tensed for possible trouble. But Wellman was standing nearby and managed to quiet him.

"If one of you goes for a gun, you're both outa here—and I mean it. I'm not gonna have the Mounties close me up at the peak of the summer business."

Yancy calmed down until Grogan made the mistake of laughing gleefully when he bluffed him out with a pair of fives. The gambler's eyes hardened to slits and his hand twitched toward his coat, but then he seemed to relax and gain control of himself. That was why

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Ben was taken off guard a few hands later when Yancy suddenly sprang to his feet.

"That's the last time you deal yourself an ace from the bottom of the deck!" he shouted at Race, and in a flash he pulled a small Derringer from beneath his coat.

Ben moved fast, but Race was faster. His six-shooter was in his hand and firing before Ben could draw. Yancy Booth spun to one side like a dancer and went down. Mary started screaming from her bar stool and Sam Wellman ran out of his office, gun drawn.

Ben sat there feeling like a fool. He'd traveled to the end of the world as the bodyguard for a man who was a faster draw than he was.

Sam Wellman and Pete Waters quickly carried the body away, but Sergeant Baxter and another Mountie arrived on the scene and took Race into custody. Grogan and Ben were told they'd be needed as witnesses.

"That means don't try to leave town," Baxter explained. "There's noplace you can run to around here."

Wellman told Ben that Race would be held in the local jail until a traveling judge—a circuit rider—arrived the following week for the arraignment. The trial would follow soon after, and if he was found guilty Race would be sent down to the larger jail at Whitehorse to serve his sentence.

Ben visited his employer in jail the following morning. "I should have shot him, not you. That's what you were paying me for."

"Hell, don't let it worry you," Race said. "It's a clear case of self-defense. Once the judge hears the testimony, he'll toss it out of court."

"I hope so," Ben said, but he didn't feel half as confident as Race. This was a strange part of the world, and the people up here were no friends of theirs.

The day was cloudy, with a chill in the air to add to his depression. He left the jail and decided a visit to Tess might cheer him up. Crossing the rope bridge to Paradise Alley, he could see little activity among the shacks. The men had gone out to pan for gold and the women were sleeping late.

Tess heard his knocking and came to the door, wrapping a fuzzy pink robe around her. "Come on in," she said.

"Sorry to wake you up."

She yawned. "I had a late night. Want some breakfast?"

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"What are you making?"

"Bacon and eggs."

"Sounds good to me."

He watched her start a fire in the wood stove. They talked about the weather, and then Tess said, "I hear Yancy got himself killed again last night."

"Again?"

Her back was to him as she started to fry the bacon and eggs in a large iron pan. "I don't know. Forget it."

"Tell me. You must have meant something by it."

"No, it's just that the same thing happened last fall, about a month after I got here. Yancy got into a fight with a guy at Sam's poker game and the guy shot him. Killed him, so the story went at the time. But it was all hushed up and the fellow who did it got spirited out of town. A couple of weeks later Yancy reappeared, good as new. He told me it had only been a flesh wound and he'd just been hiding out till things blew over."

"I never heard of a *victim* hiding out. Did you see the shooting?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"Most of them have moved on, I think. No, one's still here—that fellow Grogan. I'm pretty sure he was in on the game."

"How about Sam Wellman and Pete Waters?"

"Well, sure. I think Pete was working that night."

"Thanks," he said, getting to his feet.

"Don't you want your bacon and eggs?"

"Another time. Thanks, Tess."

He found Grogan down along a shallow part of the river, panning for gold dust in an area that must have been tried by every miner in Dawson. "How's your luck?" Ben called to the shaggy-haired man.

"Found myself a little dust. Not worth mentioning. Guess I'll have to move upriver."

"If you've got a minute, I'd like to ask you about Yancy Booth."

Grogan was immediately on guard. "What about him? He's dead. That's all I know."

"I hear tell something like this happened before. Everyone thought he was dead and he staged an amazing resurrection."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"You were there when it happened, Grogan. You saw the whole thing."

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"I don't know. I got a bad memory."

"What do you owe to any of them? I saw Yancy beat you out of every cent you had in the world last week."

"That was last week."

Ben took a small nugget of gold from his pocket. It was one that Race Johnson had given him as his pay so far. "How about if I break off half of this for you? It'll get you started again and you can tell everyone you panned it out of the river."

Grogan glanced around to make sure no one was watching them. "Yeah. I could tell you about it," he agreed in a voice that was almost a whisper.

Ben picked up Grogan's small hammer and carefully placed the nugget against a rock before hitting it. The split was irregular and he gave Grogan the smaller half. The shaggy man didn't complain. "Now start talking."

"They set it up to fleece this guy who was new to Dawson. Yancy pretended to be shot and they carried him out."

"Sam Wellman was in on it?"

"I don't know. But Pete Waters was. He helped carry the body out. They got some money out of the mark and sent him on his way. Then when it was safe, Yancy turned up alive."

"If the mark shot him, how come he lived?"

Grogan shrugged.

"It was a trick of some sort. I don't know how they worked it."

"All right. Thanks."

"You won't say I told you?"

"Don't worry, Grogan."

He hadn't told Ben much more than Tess had, except for his implication of the bartender. Still, the confirmation of her story was worth the portion of the nugget he'd paid Grogan. His next stop was the jail, where he found Sergeant Baxter laboriously filling out a stack of government forms.

"The job is getting to be all paperwork," he grumbled. "What can I do for you today, Mr. Snow?"

"You have a good memory for names."

Baxter smiled. "It's my business."

"I came about the shooting of Yancy Booth."

"Yes, Race Johnson is a friend of yours, isn't he? You've been here to see him."

"I'm trying to free him."

"Don't try too hard or I'll have you in the next cell."

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"I understand Yancy was shot last fall, same as this, only he didn't really die. I was thinking maybe he didn't die this time, either."

Baxter got to his feet and buttoned the collar of his red uniform jacket. "Let's go see. He's over in the icehouse."

He led Ben out the back door of the jail and across a narrow street, adjusting his hat as they went. "I've never been here," Ben said.

Sergeant Baxter unlocked the door of a building on the river bank. "They cut up ice from the river during the winter and store it here for use in the summer, just like in the big cities. I find it makes a good morgue for unclaimed bodies."

"Booth had no family?"

"None that I know of." Baxter led the way past piles of ice blocks covered with a light coating of sawdust. The temperature must have been twenty degrees cooler than outside. "If no one claims him by next week, we'll bury him in potter's field."

They stopped before a rough wooden coffin and the sergeant lifted the lid.

"Look for yourself."

It was Yancy Booth and he'd never be any deader. The naked body was partly wrapped in a winding sheet, but Ben could see the twin wounds near the heart from Race's bullets. "He's dead, all right," Ben agreed. "Are those powder burns around the wounds?"

"Not really. More a powder residue. Black powder leaves a slight residue up to about six feet away. I'd guess these shots were fired from a distance of around four feet."

"That's about right," Ben agreed. "It was a clear case of self-defense."

"The courts will rule on that."

"And Race stays in jail till they do?"

"That's right," the Mountie told him, stepping aside to let Ben precede him out of the icehouse. "I'm not in the habit of turning gunmen loose to do more shooting."

Ben left the jail without seeing Race again. His hope of discovering Yancy was still alive had been dashed. There seemed to be no hope left unless Grogan was right about the bartender's involvement. It wasn't much of a lead, but it was the only one Ben had.

He searched all afternoon for Pete Waters without finding him. Mary said she thought he'd gone prospecting with some of the others up along the Klondike River. That could mean anything. They might decide to camp out overnight or for a month.

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Back at the Golden Nugget, the poker game was still in progress. It would take more than a shooting to end it. Sam Wellman was sitting in, dealing a hand of stud to three strangers. "Is Pete working tonight?" Ben asked him.

"He's supposed to, but I haven't seen him. If he doesn't show up soon, I'll have to take over myself."

It was getting dark when Ben decided to call on Tess over in Paradise Alley. There was nothing to be gained by waiting any longer for Waters.

He'd started across the rope bridge in the dusk when a voice called out behind him.

"Snow! Ben Snow!"

Ben turned and saw a shadowy figure barely visible at the end of the bridge.

"Who is it?" he called back.

"Pete Waters—I hear you been lookin' for me!"

"That's right, I have!" Ben started back toward shore, the bridge swaying a bit underfoot.

"Well, you found me—or I found you!"

There was the sudden flare and boom of a shotgun. Ben felt the rope railing come loose in his hand as the spray of buckshot parted its strands. He was drawing his gun when the second barrel discharged and he went off the bridge, still clutching the loose rope railing.

By some miracle, the rope swung him back toward shore, and when his feet hit the water he was almost to dry land. He fell forward onto the river bank, trying not to reveal his location in the darkness. Some twenty feet above him, he heard Waters break open the shotgun to reload it.

Suddenly there was a shout from the opposite shore. "Ben! Ben, are you hurt?"

He recognized Tess's voice calling out of the darkness, but he dared not reveal his position by answering her. She had seen him crossing in the dusk, seen him falling, and now she was hoping he was alive. The bridge above him hung at an awkward angle without one of its rope supports, and outlined against the night sky he saw her venture out a few feet, still calling his name.

Ben heard the shotgun snapped shut and cocked. He scrambled up on the river bank, shouting, "Go back, Tess! It's Waters and he has a shotgun!"

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The bartender fired down at his voice and Ben heard the chatter of buckshot striking the rocks around him. He realized suddenly that his arm was bleeding, either from the first shot or the fall.

"Ben!" Tess yelled again.

The bartender's shotgun boomed, but this time there was the crack of a pistol at almost the same instant. Ben saw Waters stagger onto the bridge and fall, his body caught by the rope support as the shotgun slipped from his grip to splash into the river below.

"You can come up now!" Sergeant Baxter shouted down to Ben. "It's all over!"

An hour later, when Ben's flesh wounds had been tended to by Tess and Mary, he sat in Sam Wellman's office at the Golden Nugget and tried to explain what had happened. Wellman and the girls were there, along with Sergeant Baxter, who'd promised to free Race Johnson if Ben convinced him of his innocence. Ben called Grogan in from the poker game to bolster his case, and the man repeated what he'd told Ben.

"Why didn't you come forward with this before?" Sergeant Baxter wanted to know.

"Because I was afraid of Waters and Yancy. If they're both dead, they can't hurt me now."

"You claim the two of them were extorting money from prospectors by pretending Yancy was dead?"

"That's right. Yancy wore a metal pan full of sawdust under his shirt. Pete Waters doctored the bullets somehow, removing some of their powder, so when they were fired at Yancy's chest they just thudded into the sawdust. Yancy pretended to be dead and the mark got arrested. Then, when he paid Waters enough money, Yancy staged an amazing recovery."

"That's what happened last fall," Wellman admitted. "But I never connected it with this week's shooting."

"I hear they pulled the same trick in Whitehorse before they came here," Grogan said.

But Baxter shook his head.

"That doesn't change the fact that this time Yancy was really killed, and by two bullets fired into his chest by Race Johnson. You saw the body yourself, Snow."

"Yes, I did," Ben admitted. "But what I saw convinced me of Race's innocence."

"How come?"

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"Remember the residue of black powder around the wounds? It was consistent with the distance between Race and Yancy at the time of the shooting, but it was all wrong for another reason. The powder residue would have been on Yancy's shirt or coat, not on his bare skin. He was shot later, after he'd removed both his shirt and the metal pan that protected him. And that means Race didn't do it."

"Wait a minute," Sergeant Baxter said, holding up his hand as everyone started talking at once. "You're saying Yancy was alive, only pretending to be shot, when Sam here and Waters carried him out?"

"Exactly. He was killed later."

"But why?"

"A falling-out among thieves, I suppose. What safer time to kill Yancy than when everyone thought he was already dead?"

"All right," Baxter agreed. "You've convinced me. If Pete Waters killed Yancy, your friend should go free. Yancy obviously incited Johnson to shoot him as part of the plot."

"Exactly," Ben said. "But I didn't say Waters killed Yancy."

"What? Then who did?"

"Someone had to tamper with the bullets in Race's gun so they wouldn't fire a full charge. Not only that, but whoever it was had to do the same with my gun. I was Race's bodyguard. When Yancy drew his gun, this person couldn't know whether Race or I would shoot first."

"You're saying Waters couldn't have tampered with your gun?"

"Yes. Only you could have done that, Sergeant, when you checked the serial number. You pretended to check the cartridges, too, but with a little sleight of hand you were actually substituting half loaded bullets that wouldn't penetrate the metal pan under Yancy's shirt. You were there when he took it off, and you're the one who killed him, just as you killed Pete Waters later so he wouldn't talk."

Baxter was smiling as he drew his pistol. "I've heard enough from you. Want to try drawing against me?"

"Not with these bullets," Ben said.

The rest were frozen in position, watching the gun in the Mountie's hand. It was Tess who moved first. She picked up a whiskey bottle and brought it down on Baxter's head.

The next day, when Race Johnson had been released from jail, Ben suggested it was time for them to move on. "We've given our

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sworn statement and that should be enough. But if you stay around Dawson, someone's going to decide you should testify at Baxter's trial."

"What about the gold? There's lots more around."

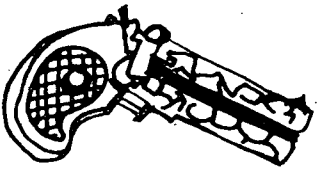
"Maybe we should head over to the Alaska Territory," Ben said. "I'd just as soon stay clear of Baxter's Mountie friends. They might not like our giving them a bad name."

Race still had some questions about the set-up. "But with Yancy really dead, how could Baxter hope to shake me down for my gold?"

"Probably by offering you a chance to escape. He'd have shot you, of course, after he got your gold. I guess he figured he couldn't resurrect Yancy twice in the same town, but by killing him and then shooting Pete Waters he figured he'd removed all the potential evidence against himself. I should have suspected him sooner than I did. Naturally, he would have examined the body and seen the metal pan under Yancy's shirt. He had to be part of the scheme."

Race glanced sadly down the main street of Dawson. "I was getting to like this place. How soon do we have to leave?"

"Maybe we can stay over a day or two," Ben decided. "I did promise the girls I'd try to help them repair their bridge."



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a *NEW* short story by

CARLETON CARPENTER

Skipper was much more to Beanie than just an older sister. She was all the family he'd ever really known. Single-handedly she had kept the two of them out of foster homes by proving to the courts that she was able to support the two of them by modeling. Now Skipper was dead. Murdered in the front bedroom of their fourth-floor walk-up on Bank Street in Greenwich Village . . .

THE TEASE

by CARLETON CARPENTER

Okay, maybe she wasn't the brightest girl in the borough of Manhattan. And maybe too much of her original Bronx accent did pop out at all the wrong times, confining her almost exclusively to print work. Once in a while she'd land a television commercial, providing she didn't have to read copy. That voice just didn't go with the beautiful face and figure. And she sure was beautiful. The most beautiful older sister a guy could ever ask for.

But Skipper was much more to Beanie than just an older sister. She was all the family he'd ever really known. Ten years ago, when Beanie was nine and Skipper was fifteen, their parents had been killed in that freak subway accident up by Grand Concourse. Since then, Skipper had been sole provider, comforter, encourager, disciplinarian, the works. Single-handedly she had kept the two of them out of foster homes by proving to the courts that she was able to support the two of them by modeling.

Oh, there was a little financial help from their Aunt Jo in Miami for a couple of years before she moved away to Europe with that character who had over-curled hair and underworld connections. Aunt Jo had never suggested that Beanie and his sister come join

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her in the sunnier climes of Florida before her sudden departure abroad.

Even better than financial help was the love and guidance Skipper received from the Sisters at a tiny parish around the corner from the apartment she had rented for them a few years back on Bank Street in Greenwich Village—St. Paul's on West Eleventh. Skipper hadn't been all that religious before the accident, but now it helped fill the terrible void. The Sisters at St. Paul's sort of adopted the two of them, like surrogate parents. Especially Sister Luke Anne—Sister La. What a wonderful person! And what a wonderful blessing for Beanie.

Sister La not only taught him guitar (she gave instruction on saxophone and clarinet) but Ping-Pong and pool as well. She was nearly unbeatable at both. The parish gym was so small there was space for only half a basketball court. She was a surprising hoopster along with all her other gifts—deadly accurate from the foul line. She worked out often with Beanie. But after catching a passed ball incorrectly and spraining a thumb, he stuck with the guitar.

Skipper gave free aerobic classes at the gym almost three nights a week to help even things up, although she knew in her heart she'd never be able to repay the church for everything it had done for her and her brother. What a great kid he'd turned into. Talented, too. He made that old second-hand guitar really sing.

Now Skipper was dead. Murdered in the front bedroom of their fourth-floor walk-up apartment.

The police had a number of leads but, strung together and pursued, they led nowhere. Beanie knew the leads, too. He heard all about them the morning after the murder when he returned to Manhattan from an all-night gig in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He'd recently been getting a pick-up booking now and then with his electric bass. The night of the murder had been one of the now-and-theners.

One of the detectives from the Sixth Precinct, a youngish rookie named Morris, filled him in gently on what details there were, handling the kid brother's grief with a quiet and reassuring manner. He slipped Beanie his card with his personal number at the precinct, making him promise to call if he thought of or ran across anything that might help catch the perpetrator.

Beanie heard about the blonde girl in the levis that Mrs. Cunningham had seen leaving the building just before the Eleven O'Clock News that night. He knew about the kitchen knife that had

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been the murder weapon. The knife—one of those really good carbon ones you don't have to sharpen all the time—that had been among the gifts he'd given Skipper just last Christmas. And he knew about the minute traces of blue eyeshadow that had been found on the ivory handle of the knife. He was told how old Mrs. Cunningham, who was half blind, had dialed 911 when she heard the commotion upstairs and how the police had arrived before his sister had died. And how Skipper had found the strength to utter one single word before she succumbed.

Paula.

She died before they got her downstairs to the waiting ambulance.

With state-of-the-art procedural speed, the police determined that the killer was a professional rival of Skipper. A blonde model of above average height called Paula, named by the dying victim and seen leaving the scene of the crime by a neighbor. All very neatly packaged. A jealous rival.

Beanie knew better. Jealous of what? His sister was the kindest, most thoughtful, most unselfish girl in the world. She had arranged nearly as many bookings for buddies in the business as she had for herself.

Beanie later tried to explain that to Morris, who said he understood. Nevertheless, the information somehow got filed away in a nonexistent filial-devotion folder. And time had gone by. Weeks. According to the cops, they had made exhaustive checks on every model agency in the city. They kept coming up empty-handed. The few Paulas they managed to turn up turned out to be the wrong shape or coloring or both. And all had alibis tighter than their designer jeans for the evening of the murder.

Beanie went over to a place on Sixth Avenue and had a favorite snapshot of Skipper laminated so it would stay wrinkle-free and forever with him in the slim wallet he'd learned to carry in his shirt pocket next to his heart. Safer there than the pickpocket-prone back hip.

Morris's card, the phone number long ago committed to memory, was right up there behind Skipper's beautiful picture. Maybe some of the cops had edged her murder into the overflowing file of unsolved crimes, but Beanie wasn't about to give up the search for his sister's killer. As long as Paula was out there someplace, he'd keep looking. Somehow he felt Morris would, too. Reassuringly, he patted his breast pocket in silent affirmation of their partnership . . .

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"Hey, baby, you wouldn't be trying to hustle a hustler now, would you?" The golden boy grinned lopsidedly from his hunched-over position at the pool table as Beanie put his quarter down.

"Are you nuts?" Beanie grinned back. "I just like a game now and then." Tonight he needed a game. Needed to relax. Needed to enjoy.

"You shoot a pretty good stick?" The slim kid didn't straighten up. His jeans rode low on his hind quarters.

"So-so." Beanie selected a cue from the rack. He'd stopped by this place a few times before when the parish rec room was closed—for the pool table, not for the booze or the conversation of the boozers at the bar. It was called the Village Pump and it was only a couple of blocks from his apartment. Handy when you wanted to give your head a rest and concentrate on nothing but getting a few colored balls into the pockets.

The Ole Pump Pool Hall, as the regulars chose to call it, was one of those bars most people would call atmospheric, which meant the decor was Early Cobweb and the patrons were a conglomerate of free spirits, free loaders, and freaks. Vintage Village.

"Hey, hey!" Golden Boy said as he neatly caromed the last ball into a side pocket. "Just so-so, huh? Sounds like the old come-on to me." He stood up, ran his hand through his long yellow hair, then extended it palm first toward Beanie. "Name's Rod." The smile was ear to ear across the baby face.

"Beanie," Beanie said, swatting the hand with a medium high five.

"Well, rack 'em up, Beanie baby. It's your quarter."

And the game started. Beanie wasn't in any mood for conversation. Just line them up and shoot.

Rod broke expertly, took solids, and sank four in a row before Beanie got to take his first shot. He was rusty, hadn't played in weeks. Not since— But he didn't want to think about that. That's why he was here. Just concentrate on the game. Make the shots. Clear your head.

Rod took the first game easily. Beanie did better on the second rack, although he still lost. But Rod was lazy. Third time around, with a couple of lucky shots, Beanie pulled the game out.

Rod's indolent smile tightened noticeably. He obviously didn't relish losing. He started a running commentary on the game, a ruse designed to psyche Beanie out. And he began to grandstand, playing to the bar, flirting for attention in order to rally support for his play. This was clearly war and he wanted all the allies he could muster.

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What little talk there was at the bar was now about the ongoing battle at the pool table. Rod seemed to be a favorite here at the Ole Pump. Cheers and scattered applause followed each of his successful shots. Nevertheless, Beanie's game steadily improved. He was into it now. If the golden boy wanted war, he was ready to do battle. None of Rod's tricks deterred him. He became immune to the sudden bursts of laughter, the coughing, the scratching, the slopped beer, the atomic cloud of cigar smoke the kid laid over the table. He took three games in a row. And the steadier he became, the more reckless Rod got, his tricks backfiring on him and his anger edging closer to the surface.

Someone from the bar approached the table and put a quarter on the edge. Rod snatched it up, hurled it at the mirror over the back bar, and lifted his cue as if to strike the man who wanted to take on the winner.

"Go suck up your scotch, buster! This is my chicken!" He tried to smile as if making a joke. No one laughed. But the intruder retreated to the bar. He had seen something wild in the blond man's eyes.

So had Beanie. This was getting too heavy. He'd had enough and started to put his cue back in the rack.

Rod stepped quickly between Beanie and the rack.

"Hey, hey, you ain't gonna back off now, are you? You got me all turned on! Know what I mean?" The lopsided smile was back but the washed-out eyes above it were deadly serious. "What are you, anyway? Some kind of tease? Like a broad that gets you all hotted up and then reaches for the cold-water faucet?" He began furiously racking up the balls for another game.

"C'mon, Beanie baby, break 'em up, break 'em up! You can't leave me standing here all frustrated-like, can you? One last game, okay? Okay?"

Beanie stared at him from the cue rack without moving.

Rod grabbed the small cube of chalk and ground the tip of his stick into it, as he had before every shot. "Break 'em up, Beanie, break 'em up!"

Slowly, Beanie walked to the far end of the pool table.

"Atta boy, I knew you wouldn't leave a buddy hung out there to dry. Now them broads, they're something else again. They'll do it without as much as winking an eye. Waltz you up to their fancy apartments cozy as can be. Pretending all that innocence, like they didn't know they had a pro in tow. Giving you that crap about how

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lonely they are, how all alone in the world they are, except maybe for some made-up baby brother or something. Who, of course, isn't there, so everything's private and perfect as can be. Then, when you ask for a couple of Jacksons' stud-fee, they go all wide-eyed with surprise and want to turn the cold shower on you—"

Beanie leaned over the table to make the break. He pushed the cue chalk to one side. Then he froze, staring at the small blue cube with the deep dimple, and his hands had never been steadier, his head had never been clearer. He knew he had finally found Paula.

He straightened up and laid his stick on the table. "Be right with you. I gotta see a man about a dog." He headed toward the john.

"Nerves getting to the ole kidneys, huh?" Rod teased. "Don't let all your luck run out!"

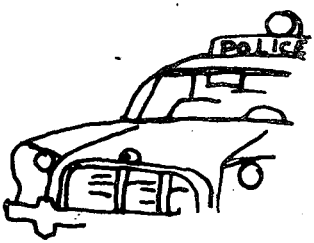
Beanie turned the corner and dialed Morris's number on the wall phone by the men's-room door. He knew whose luck had run out. Not his.

Skipper hadn't said Paula. The Bronx had crept in. Her last words, not word, were "pool hall." And their downstairs neighbor had seen a golden boy, not a girl.

Well, the golden boy wanted one last game. Anything to oblige.

When he returned to the table, Beanie picked up the cue stick and chalked it teasingly, deliberately, with the blue "eyeshadow." He'd take his sweet time. Morris and another cop were on the way.

A strong shot to the cue ball. A perfect break. Sister La would have approved.



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a *NEW* George Man story by

KEITH HELLER

Keith Heller is a 36-year-old Minnesotan, just returned from six years of living in Japan and Spain. This is his first (and auspicious) story in EQMM and it features the engaging George Man (Man's Illegal Life, *Scribners 1985,* Man's Storm, *Scribners 1986), observant watchman in the London of the early Eighteenth Century—that time in its history when the Empire was beginning to grow . . .*

MAN'S INHERITED DEATH

by KEITH HELLER

In the deeper half of January, 1729, in the short darkness of York Street, one of the dingiest Covent Garden tributaries London had to offer, George Man—fifty, hoarse, and wearied, a professional watchman for most of his adult life—stood stiff and winded, with his staff and lanthorn in his hands, and decided it was time for him to quit.

He should not have come out at all tonight, should have stayed snug and drinking in the watch-house with the other men. No one needed him tonight, no one else had been foolish enough to brave tonight's weather, not even the usual hard and screaming revelers who nightly circulated about Covent Garden like clods in sludge. It was two o'clock—he had just called it out to the deaf and inanimate street—and he had met no more than a handful of people all night. Like him, they had been too busy struggling for breath to bother thinking of trouble, too intent upon finding or reaching some door that they could close against the cold. And once inside, they probably wanted nothing more than to fall into the kind of wrapping sleep a January snowstorm can give.

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Man was jealous of them, of their secured windows and their mounded, heating blankets. He had fought long enough tonight against the crazing wind and cutting snow. He had kneed his way through enough cold and solid drifts for one night, grappled with plenty of dizzying gusts; and now his boots were cracking, his nose was pinched, and his eyelids were shriveled almost shut. He must be a fool. Nothing could be happening tonight.

It was a wonder that he heard the window opening at all, what with the storm and his wet ears. A crashing somewhere in the darkness above him sounded across his shoulders and a sharp voice came down to him, brittle and shrunken with the wind.

"Here, man! Help me! Here!"

The watchman hoisted his lanthorn higher and saw only whipped snow. "The watch, the watch is here! Name yourself!" Man thought his voice was too weak to rise, the wind was taking it too far away.

"Wait," the man called. "I see your light. I'll be down, sir. To the door, the door of the shop."

Reaching forward with his light, Man saw the barred door of a shuttered house. The beaten signboard above it could be barely read: *Edmund Cowley, Jeweller.* An etched depiction of a lion holding a huge ring in his mouth, a rough border of loose stones. The sign hung dangerously from a bending rod.

A bank of swept snow drifted up toward the door. Man saw a single, vague set of bootprints, now all but filled, there was heard an inward noise of bolts and latches, and then another lanthorn mirroring his own. A shaking hand reached out.

"Will you come up, sir?" Man heard a normally strong voice quaver. "It's my father. Upstairs. He is dead, I think."

The watchman was led through an unaired shop toward an invisible flight of back stairs. He had doused his own candle and now followed the host light through a succession of skimming visions—murky shelves and cabinets, a forbidding counter crowned with more than one pair of scales, low doors suggesting rarely unlocked storerooms—all the trademarks of the shrewd and careful jeweller. It was the kind of shop that, in a newer house and in a higher neighborhood, might well invite some of the best society of London. Man sensed a stark economy surrounding him, but no poverty. It was rather as though all had been drawn in and tightened, sealed off from the outside, as if to make ready for the storms of avarice and envy that would always threaten.

The light showed the watchman a little of the man ahead of him.

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A man of about forty years, fastidiously dressed in a serviceable coat and inexpensive wig, a lean man, almost gaunt and hungry but with the enduring leanness of a cautiously whittled switch. His wrung face looked whiter than the yellowing candle alone should have made it. Man noticed in his movements a tension that could have been mere force of character, personal determination; yet right now it seemed more like painfully restrained excitement. Halfway up the steps and still climbing, his host was already upstairs, talking even faster than he had climbed.

"I came in late tonight, due to the heat of the storm. I thought I might not get back at all, such piles of snow turning me right out of the Strand. This day and night have made a most dreadful havoc among the trades."

They had reached the upstairs landing and come to a stop in a short hallway with three doors, all closed. The air about them was stale and very cold.

"I came up here to wish my father a good night before going to my own bed. There was no light, but I know he sleeps very little. And—he wanted to see me." The watchman listened to the man's voice, hearing the terror or joy or madness hidden in it. "I found him at his table—sleeping, I thought—but when I touched him—" The lanthorn shook the frail light. "I cannot quite believe it yet."

Man frowned at him, set down staff and lanthorn, and brushed past him into the unlocked room

The room was small, a cramped marriage of business and rest. A low, curtained bed took up most of one wall. It was old and breaking, and it had not been slept in tonight. An unmatched pair of elbow-chairs stood with their backs to it, facing a ponderous walnut desk that was symmetrically bordered with piled ledgers and bound papers. A sloping stand for books rested on top, next to a bowed figure that looked as if it had been crumpled and twisted and thrown hurriedly aside. Man noticed first, ridiculously, the breathing rise and fall of white neck hairs in a secret draft. Then the quill pen discarded near one hand and the bare space on the desktop.

"Was he writing?"

The watchman's question distracted the other's examination of the business ledgers shelved on the wall behind the desk. He looked blankly at the still pen.

"What? Writing?"

Man glanced about him. "You have moved nothing? Removed nothing?"

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"I assure you, sir, I have not."

Bending over the dead man, the watchman observed the uncomfortable grey nightgown, the old wrenched throat, the sparrow's face hardened first by life, then by death. The cheek was cold as new paper.

"This is your father, then?"

"It was, sir." The inflection stood alone in the dulled room. "He was Edmund Cowley, the jeweller. I am his son, Harold Cowley. His first son."

The watchman reached beneath his greatcoat for his pipe, to warm himself. He could hear the storm outside, jostling thickly the tired house.

He found a twist of straw in his pocket and with it lit his pipe from the lanthorn.

"You have a brother?"

"Christopher, yes."

"But he does not live here in his father's house?"

Harold Cowley was fingering some papers almost at his father's elbow. Man's question straightened him, stiffening.

"My brother is married, sir. He has his own family. In Rood Lane, next the shop where he works as a journeyman joiner. He has been there I should say almost ten years now. Living with his wife and son." A distant satisfaction. "Very poorly, I am afraid."

Man was smoking, slowly stalking the room. "Does no one else live here?"

"No one, sir."

"No servants, then?"

"My father could never abide them, nor their demands." He paused, added proudly: "I have always done for him myself, sir."

The watchman came to a stop behind the inert father. Very carefully, he took the pipe out of his mouth, read the dome of fine ash in the bowl, and stuffed it burning back into his pocket. He spoke gravely, officially, staring at nothing somewhere off to the younger man's left.

"Your father, sir, has had his life choked out of him this night, that much is clear. Now I am nothing beyond a simple watchman myself. I can do no more, say no more. We have no way of saying who has done this act: I have no felon here that I can lay hold of and carry to the nearest watch-house, which is all my work." He looked, explaining, directly at Harold Cowley, then away again. "You understand, sir, that we cannot alone take your father through

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the streets in this dark storm. Enough for us to find a way for ourselves through the high snow without."

"I must go with you, then?" The jeweller's first son sounded as if he wanted never to move again, though he obviously was not tired. "Where must we go?"

Man considered it.

"Constable Marlowe's house is hard by us here—in White Hart Yard, as I remember. We should be able to reach there in half an hour or less. Quicker than the watch-house in the Strand, at any rate. And he's a man of lively parts, never one to mind his being taken from his sleep. His dreams, he tells me, only weary him more than his waking."

Facet by facet, the watchman smoothly studied the room a last time. Then he delicately drifted the jeweller's son toward the door. "If the storm dies some, the coroner will want to sit here tomorrow to question the death formally," he said, opening the door. "Do you have a key?"

"Of course," Cowley assured him. "For this and for the other rooms. And the street."

Just as they were leaving the quiet of the room, Man had another thought.

"Is anything missing, do you think?"

The other's eyes searched, wondered, could not decide. "I've been looking all this while. I think not. But—" He strained for perfect honesty. "There's really not so very much here, you see, and I know it all so well. There's nothing taken, I think, nothing that should be here and is not. I'm certain. And yet—from the first tonight I've thought the room was different in some way. Some way changed. Everything is in its place, but there is something altered somewhere. I don't know." Harold Cowley faltered. "Perhaps it is only his death that has made the room seem new to me."

"Yes," Man agreed quietly. "Death can do that."

The next day—cold, but still and clear—found George Man sharing more than one cup of warmed wine in the house of Constable Marlowe. The watchman slept through most of most mornings, but today his wife, Sarah, had thrown him out with the corner dust. They were in the process of moving—no, Sarah was in the process of moving them—from their long-lived apartments in Ironmonger Row off Old Street north of the City to others somewhat smaller and less dear in Bow Street. Now was the worst season of the year, and

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the worst weather of the season, to move: how many times had Man told her? But once set in motion, Sarah could not be stalled. So now she was hectoring and frazzled, hip-deep in opened trunks and roped boxes. The few possessions they meant to keep had interbred overnight, hiding most of the floor. Man could have gone anywhere, but he was curious about last night's death, and he was always ready to trade cups and news with Constable Marlowe.

Humphry Marlowe was a bony, yellowish man, a drooping and dour cutler and razor-maker. His was not a happy face. The indentation in his upper lip had formed from a lifetime spent refining daily miseries, the dent in his forehead from a dread of contentment as deep-seated as most men's fear of paralysis. Marlowe distrusted joy, especially his own—he could never feel at ease with it. Now he had the unpaid and compulsory position of parish constable to add to his own continuing trade, to take him hourly away from his rightful work, to introduce him to the purest trouble the streets had to show. He hadn't felt this good in years.

The watchman was sitting with him at a scored table midway between a healthy fire and a window sparkling with cold sunlight. The granular falsetto of a grindstone reached between them from a back room, but the constable had learned long since to modulate his voice in harmony with it.

"Aye, George," he said, "Coroner Dicey is even now sitting in the jeweller's house in York Street, doubtless casting his legal dust about him and blinding every eye. He's a very complete man is that one!" Constable Marlowe made a rude noise in his tapered nose. "Have the fellow stripped and on his knee by this hour, say I."

"Was it not your business to attend?"

The constable looked even more hurt than usual.

"My business is here, sir, and it is failing me even as we speak. And I don't love Mr. Dicey so much, I'll own it to any who will hear. Our coroner and I have found us a conflict between us, you see. Of minds," he added dryly. "*I* have one."

"What will be the upshot of it, do you know?" Man spoke with some care, knowing his own powerlessness in the parish and the constable's dissatisfied pride in not excelling in a job he did not want. "Will Mr. Dicey determine it a killing theft?"

The thin cutler mulled a mouthful of wine and thoughtfully lifted his overgrown pipe off the table.

"Bring us a piece of fire, will you, George?"

Man stepped over to the fireplace and carried back a flaming

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straw. In a minute the two men were clouding the air over their heads blue and dimming at the window the light and silence of White Hart Yard.

"Well, there's little question of the end of last night's work, is there?" Constable Marlowe asked. "I know myself a small something of that shop in York Street and of the man that made it. Edmund Cowley was widowed with the two sons as quick as the second pulled his feet out of the mother. She was glad to go, I'd wager, before her man could think of some way to make her pay him for her passage to heaven. Aye, that was a pinching penny-father, was that one. One that would make the boys chew the same lump of bread twice, my thought. I heard it said that he never so much as slept the night for fear he might forget the day's count. Loved it, they say, as a right-minded man loves his smoke. And he taught his first son the same song, until he could sing it even better than his father."

"The business thrived, then?"

"Few better in this side of the town. The father made and sold stones to those whose names he'd never dare write out. He gave that work mainly to Harold—best said Harold took it for himself. That's where the boy was supposed last night, out carrying a pocketful of rings to a dame in Golden Square. Took him a long hour or more to fight his way home—if you believe his word."

Man squinted through his smoke at the constable's sour look.

"You think otherwise, Mr. Marlowe?"

"I do. As does Coroner Dicey and most other men. 'Tis no great puzzler, is it?" Marlowe asked the watchman lightly. "Look you, the first son's a chip of the same block with the father, truth? He knows the trade even better, loves it more, the height of coin it can get him. He's the very image of him, a second Edmund. And for too long now he's been naught but the running link-boy of the shop, carrying the scraps from Westminster to Wapping, waiting for the sire to kick up long past his time. There's a turn, friend, will weary a man in a time. First-born and working day by day for the old man's shop, and then comes the last will and testament as the final and meanest cast to—"

"What will is this you speak of?" Man interrupted.

The cutler allowed himself to show a thin triumph.

"Well, the same the jeweller himself writ out this same week!"

"It has been found, then."

"Eh? Why, no, not quite now. But there's a lawman over in Gray's Inns who promises that Father Cowley made it. And—" Constable

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Marlowe breathed slyly "—he says the paper, every word on it, saves the shop and every stone and every penny for the second son—this Christopher that lives only to hammer his master's chairs and tables together. As if he wanted it, as if he knew what to do with it if he had it!"

"Nothing for the older brother? Nothing?"

"Not a shadow to sell a blind man!"

The watchman was surprised. "But why?"

The constable paused to stare disconsolately into his pipe bowl, then he rapped out the dead ash onto the floor. The distant grindstone slowed down, ground to a stop.

"As well as I can know it, the old man never loved the young woodworkman over-well, and never forgave him the running out from the family, the trade. I can see that—a man wants what he leaves behind him to be his still. And the boy's been as much help as a pair of Mahometan whiskers on a new bride's lip, carrying himself off to another street, showing his back to what his father made for him." He shook his head at such unmercantile ingratitude. "Still, seems the boy did, at hazard, at last gift the old fellow with what he'd all the time wanted more than anything—more even than his shop and all."

Man nodded.

"A grandson," he murmured.

His sudden insight keenly disappointed Constable Marlowe.

"As you say. A boy to keep the name living even longer than the trade—something the other son could most like never manage. And so the old man makes his plans to give all he's got to him that don't want it, until—" the voice crackled significantly "—until the son that's earned it learns who it's going to and spirits away father and paper at one single swoop. He knows it's his as first-born, so he picks a stormy night to murder the jeweller and—"

"And runs to the window to call me in as witness and invite himself at once to the gallow-tree at Tyburn. Yes, that is wise."

Suspicious and unhappy, the constable regarded Man with a long, unwinking stare and started to scrape his chair backward. "Wise enough at leastways to gull a simple watchman, eh? But not sharp enough to hoodwink the rest of them that know!"

Humphry Marlowe walked him to the door, but Man thought it closed a little more roughly than usual. Yet it could have been the cold, or even the fitful wind that was growing in the brisk street. There could be many explanations.

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The fact was, the Mans had a favorite chair that needed mending badly. It had never sat level or well; and what better time to have it fixed than en route to Bow Street? Rood Lane lay out of his way, but the joiner's shop in it was said to do good work.

If the streets had been clear of snow, Man could have borrowed a wheelbarrow; by the time he got there, he had had enough of carrying it and his arms ached with cramp. As he tapped on the front door of the shop, his first thought was to wonder if the proprietor might not happen to own some kind of a cart, lying idle for the day.

The master joiner was nowhere to be found, but Man did not trouble himself greatly to look. A dusted workman led him and his chair into a long, low-ceilinged room that was a concentrate of hot sawdust, aromatic shavings, the grunting and noisiness of six or seven working men. There was nothing crowded or chaotic about the shop: each man seemed satisfied with his place and work, the floor was comfortably carpeted with fresh litter, the air was that of an open wood. It was the kind of place that Man had always liked best—a place of simple accomplishment and simple rest—and as he lowered his chair he felt that he was in no real hurry to question the young man coming forward gladly to greet him.

Christopher Cowley was a solid and healthy man of thirty or so, robust as apples, who looked as though he could never be unsettled or rushed. He wore a leather apron hung with dully glinting tools, a cloth of limpid green roped around his neck, and a tight cap; and the watchman thought he had two of the firmest hands to be seen anywhere in London.

The journeyman joiner greeted the chair first.

"She's standing a bit poorly, ain't she?"

Man explained the circumstances of his wife's preference for the chair and of their moving.

"Let's carry her over to the corner here so we can see after her quiet-like," the joiner said, cradling it.

In the corner, the watchman bent over Christopher Cowley, admiring his work. "May I say, sir," he said in a low voice, "that I can feel your present sorrow."

The joiner looked up, his clear face shadowed.

"You are Mr. Christopher Cowley?"

"Kit, sir."

"Kit. I am George Man. I—know something of your family and its new—reverses."

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He saw the joiner tense slightly, the working of his hands intensify.

The watchman, interested in both the man and his craft, crouched down beside him.

"It's a hard chance, Kit, that makes a man lose both father and brother at the one throw—the father murdered, the brother accused. I say nothing of shame, trust me," Man hurriedly reassured him. "No, this runs far deeper."

Kit Cowley hesitated, then turned to him.

"My brother, sir, cannot be guilty of this."

"Your forgiveness. Yet even now he lies chained in Newgate Prison. Few men are ever Newgated for nothing."

"He is innocent."

"Perhaps. Yet I fear—" Man began.

"That small hammer there, sir, if you please."

The joiner busied himself with what he knew best. The shop became a detached wash of energy around the two kneeling men, around their gentle probing of one another. Kit Cowley was shy, anxious, defensive; the watchman was caring and insistent. He shifted his weight, coming closer, and tried again.

"I may tell you," he lied softly, "that the Justice of Peace and I are close. It may be that a word to him—"

"You would do that for him, sir?"

"Do you wish your brother freed from this once and away?"

"Of course, of course." Troubled, the joiner seemed to distance himself from his work, trusting his hands to their mechanical experience. "My brother and I have never agreed—we might have been born and grown in different streets—yet he is my brother, and older, and I have always loved him as one. When I left our father's house ten years ago or more, he had a mouthful of hard words for me—harder even than my father's, and his were hard enough. Neither of them understood me, could know me deeply enough to understand. The business has ever been as nothing to me, no more than a sinking burden attached to the Cowley name. And the stones are cold, dead—only things to please the eye alone." The young man stroked a leg of the chair, felt its grain, followed a warm curve with his blunt fingers. "I found a craft for myself that I could follow with care and pride, making the wood grow and change as I willed it. It lives, it can be used to make another man's life easier and happier. And even before I turned away from the house, I had found another to share it with."

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"Your wife?"

Cowley nodded. "They would not love her, they would not believe that she wanted to love them. My brother could never see her as more than one who was bent upon injuring the family. Perhaps it is his remembering our mother too well, too sorrowfully. He knew her."

Man gave him a moment, then asked him, "You have prospered?"

"I think I have, sir," he answered, smiling contentedly. "My good wife has given me one tall son and is now big with another child. I am blessed with greater treasures than most men, I think."

"I meant," Man corrected him gently, "in your trade."

The young man tugged uncomfortably at a joint in the chair.

"I think I do as well as I can. I have modest enough talents for the work; at times I find each one of my fingers turned a thumb."

What might have sounded false from another man became an honest complaint from Kit Cowley, the uneasiness of a man who can never trust himself to succeed.

Man watched him coaxing the chair back into shape and marveled at the precise efficiency of his gestures.

"No, Kit, I should call you as able a man as any other, perhaps more. I wonder that you do not make a shop of your own someday and become master of yourself."

The journeyman squatted back and dropped his voice. He spoke directly at his work, losing the watchman.

"A master? To lay me down at night with waking fears of the morrow and start the day in dread of losing all? To work with the ghost of failure and disgrace always at my side? To lower all my loved family into shadow so that they will not distract me from my love of gain?" He paused, seeming to contract himself into a smaller space. "No, sir. I have seen too much of the cold and misery that come with a fuller purse. They can kill a man against his will—his wife, his children, his life's happiness."

Man looked away, thinking he understood him now. He felt the active shop wrapping itself more snugly about them.

The chair stood firm and true now. Both men rose to their feet, clumsily avoiding each other's eyes. The wooden smells of the room were so clean and piercing that the watchman felt a moment's dizziness. He knew what he had to say.

"A man makes his own happiness, Kit. And a purse may be worn as easy heavily as no. You will have to learn that yourself, when the will is found."

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The young man stumbled without moving.

"What will?"

"Your father's, of course. You knew of it." It was a statement, not a question. "Even more of it than your brother, am I right?"

"What? Harold? But he knew nothing of it!"

"Are you certain of this?" Man asked him closely.

"Yes—yes, I am. I learned of it only two or three days before our father's death, when I carried back the reading-desk I had mended. He meant to tell my brother sometime later."

The joiner ended weakly, adrift, but Man believed him. The old jeweller would have wanted his first-born son to wait this time.

"Can you save my brother?" Kit asked, grieving.

Man turned to him sharply. "I hope to do so. I do not wish his death. Neither of us does. Remember this, Kit," he insisted. "If he hangs, there is no way you can stop the shop from coming to you."

The young face blanched—it was seeing something the first time. Kit was a wild bird in a dark and narrowing cave.

"But what can be done?" he begged to know.

The shop was beginning to coast into its mid-day halt. A few workmen had already unwrapped their bread and cheese, uncorked their thick bottles of ale. A dusty quiet settled into the room, the elementary peacefulness of unthinking rest. One man, old and pitted with scars, was cutting his food into mouthfuls with his working saw. The master joiner had never appeared.

The watchman took it all in at once: the unchanging rhythm of the shop, the rooted steadiness of laboring men, the security, the anonymity, the worry and irresolution of the young journeyman joiner. Everything here, Man could now see, formed an enduring whole.

He set down his chair with a grateful sigh and bent slightly forward.

"I think you have nothing for it, Kit, but to own to be guilty of the murdering yourself."

The Mans were finally settled into their new rooms in Bow Street, and George Man at least approved. Their old home in Ironmonger Row had been somewhat bigger, certainly less stuffy, and constantly perfumed with the rising odors of the bake-shop downstairs; but the street, so far to the north and near to the fields, lay so much apart from the current of the city's life. Bow Street had more to offer, more shouting and trading by day and more arguing and fighting by night.

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Every class of people met and passed through Bow Street, not always peaceably, and that civic heartbeat was enough to make Man feel right at home.

Sarah Man felt the same, though she would never admit it. She grumbled about the want of space, the noise and danger outside, the little light. She missed the friendliness of the bake-shop and she was sure one of their new neighbors lived with a mistress. Yet the liveliness of the street had already worked on her almost as much as on her husband, and she sometimes spent as much time as he did leaning and nodding out the flung-open window.

Today Man was sitting near the window in his mended chair, appreciating its new and comforting sturdiness. He was enjoying, too, the sight of Sarah hovering over their tiny oven, baking the kind of home-raised bread he had missed when she used to depend upon the bake-shop.

The afternoon in the street outside was mild and grey, the sky low, and the air soft with random flakes. Sarah had just laid the bread out to cool, brown and crisp, when the knock Man had been expecting all day rattled the door.

Harold Cowley was a different man, profoundly altered, aged and overshadowed even since the last time Man had seen him. That had been only two days before, a heartbreakingly frozen day when they had both watched the shivering body of Christopher Cowley, narrowing and twisting slowly from the gallows at Tyburn. The faces of the brothers then had never looked more alike.

Now the jeweller sat across from Man at the window and accepted a cup of his brandy. The watchman wondered if he would ever lose the fine shaking in his hands.

"Constable Marlowe told me, Mr. Man, that I have you to thank for my life." Cowley bowed his shoulders formally. "I thank you, sir."

Man accepted his gratitude with a grim nod.

"But I do not understand the deaths of my father, my brother—"

A shadow marred the window: a clod of snow falling from the roof.

"Your father was dying?" Man asked suddenly.

The jeweller had not expected this.

"He was, sir. He knew it. The doctors promised he would never finish the year. I had thought he was making himself ready to go."

"And he did. An old man who has worked and excelled all his days, with little thought of his end, finds much to hurry him as it finally comes nearer. He sees most things newly, he finds new losses

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he had never noticed before, he easily forgets old promises, spoken or not." Man looked kindly at the merchant across from him. "If your father thought to leave his work to your brother, it was no insult to your long help. It was only that he feared leaving nothing behind him but coins and stones. An old man pains sometimes for something more."

Sarah Man helped enclose the room with her homely bustling, the way she lovingly swaddled the bread in a clean cloth.

Harold Cowley began saying something about his father's illness, but Man was only half listening. He was remembering leading Kit Cowley out of the shop in Rood Lane. The young joiner had turned for a final look at the energetic room. He had seemed to be trying to memorize it all—the yellow air, the wooden clatter, the manual persistence of the workmen. He had left his apron and tools in a far corner, and at the door he had gazed back at them with a yearning that could be seen in his entire body. His last words to a fellow workman had been barely audible:

"Tell Mr. Singleton, would you, that I'll not be needing my place tomorrow?"

Man poured another cup for Harold Cowley, politely avoiding the desperate questioning in his look.

"And so you knew nothing of your father's wish to write his will."

"I promise you, I did not. I knew he had been ailing especially of late—worse, the afternoon of that day—but I knew nothing of what he meant to do." The jeweller frowned uncertainly at a brown scar in the floor. "He must have felt very bad to call my brother out on such a night. And I was not with him."

Man gave him a long moment to recover, then explained: "He was afraid, I think, that he had waited too long, that he might not have enough time to write it out and give it, with his reasons, to your brother. So he sent for him, storm or no, to come to him at once. You should feel no pain, sir, for your actions that night. You were about your father's business."

"If I had only known that Kit had been there with him."

"You sensed it, in a fashion. Remember? Your feelings that something in that room had been changed or moved? It was your father's lectern, the reading-desk he used for his ledgers. A small enough matter, I grant you, but significant."

"But it was there on the desk that night when I took you in, sir—I remember!"

"Of course it was," Man said with some excitement. "But it should

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not have been there. Remember? Your brother had taken it to Rood Lane to mend. Do you recall his carrying it back?"

Cowley considered for a time. "I do not," he said finally.

"Because he brought it back on the night of your father's death. He must have done so. The truth is, you had grown so familiar with the sight of it in its place that you could not remark that it should still have been at the workshop. Nothing was missing from the room, but something had been added that night—by your brother."

"It must have been as you say. But how did you know it?"

"I did not," Man admitted grimly. "I supposed it. And then, sometime later in Rood Lane, I recognized Kit's workmanship." Unconsciously, he dropped his hand to stroke a jointure in the mended chair beneath him.

Mostly to himself, the other man groaned: "But how could our Kit have murdered him? It should have been myself, I think."

In his voice, Man heard the same brittle echo of private agony, hollow as regret, that he had heard in Kit Cowley's, locked in the solid dark of Newgate Prison and helpless to explain the knotted reasons for the murder.

"Many thought you did," Man said, willfully misunderstanding him. "But you, sir, are altogether too much your father; and what man in his right senses ever chooses to murder himself? Your brother, now, was someone else. He early left his family and home to make his own, he left riches for meanness, he found his happiness in being no one—in being one of a thousand common workmen in a thousand common streets, each of them content to live unknown, unremarked, invisible to all the world. He was never a man who could show himself, not even to raise himself higher in his chosen work, though he was able. Mr. Singleton, the master joiner in Rood Lane, tells me that Kit could have many times made his own shop—more than one had promised him money to start. But he was afraid—do you understand?—he was afraid to be seen, or afraid that he might succeed too well and become his father."

Man looked into the clouded, distant eyes in front of him. "It must have made him mad that night to hear his father's plan to burden him with a life he could not live, to see him begin to write it out. I'm certain it was only accident that made him push his father back so hard from the paper. He told me his hands had ever been stronger than he knew. He remembered almost nothing."

Harold Cowley turned painfully away, breathing, "And I thank God for that."

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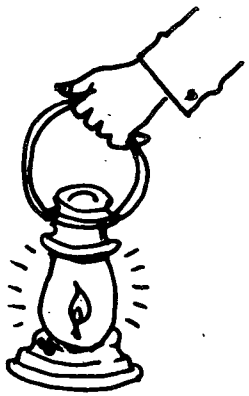
Man walked the jeweller down to the street, comforting him with empty talk of the weather that had now begun to settle into blanketing flurries. It was not until he learned that Harold Cowley was going to visit for the first time his brother's family in Rood Lane that the watchman knew this work was done.

Death is never easy for any man, he reflected, as he stood rooted deep in the Bow Street drifts. For Kit Cowley, it must have been doubly bitter, dying as he had done before the hundreds of straining eyes in Tyburn's habitually craning crowd. There, and during the ride up Holbourn in an open cart, his life's worst nightmare had kept him awake. For those few hours, he had been the most famous man in all London.

The watchman made his way back upstairs, looking nowhere. He was trying not to remember the young joiner's last moments, how he had finally turned away from the crowd's ogling to approach the gallows, how one broad hand had been stretched out to the scaffold as if for support. But then, trembling, the hand had moved in one slow and sensitive touch, the workman admiring the wood, the craftsman approving of the enduring workmanship.

Man only hoped it had helped.



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a *NEW* Kate Fansler story by

AMANDA CROSS

We're proud and pleased to publish our first story by Amanda Cross, and that it's a story narrated by Kate Fansler's niece Leighton about one of Kate's most curious cases makes it all the more pleasurable. Here is what Amanda Cross (pseudonym of Columbia University Professor of English Carolyn Heilbrun) had to say of the origin of Kate Fansler in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers:

"I like literary mysteries with a cast of characters comprising those who may not know much literature only because they have forgotten it. Also, I like fiction in which women figure as more than decoration and appendages, domestic machinery, or sex objects. In short, I like the women in my novels to be people, as they were in Nicholas Blake's early works, and in a novel like Edward Grierson's The Second Man.

"My sort of detective fiction will always be accused of snobbery. This, I have decided, is inevitable. I myself am that apparently rare anomaly, an individual who likes courtesy and intelligence, but would like to see the end of reaction, stereotyped sex-roles, and convention that arises from the fear of change, and the anxiety change brings. I loathe violence, and do not consider sex a spectator sport. I like humor, but fear unkindness, and the cruelty of power.

"One day, therefore, Kate Fansler sprang from my brain to counter these things I loathe, to talk all the time, occasionally with wit, and to offer to those who like it the company of people I consider civilized, and a plot, feeble, perhaps, but reflecting a moral universe . . ."

"Q"

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TANIA'S NO WHERE

by—AMANDA CROSS

My name is Leighton Fansler. I have long wanted to publish some of the cases of my aunt, Kate Fansler, who, while never a private investigator in any professional sense—she certainly never had a license nor was she paid—took on, like Sherlock Holmes and Peter Wimsey, many interesting cases. She has been adamant until now about her refusal to let me tell the stories of any of her cases, and no one can be more adamant than Kate Fansler. I finally got her to admit, however, that this case was an exception. All those intimately concerned with it are now dead, and no harm could be done to anyone in the telling of it. Indeed, she mused, it might be of help to some.

What was clear to Kate at the very beginning of the case was that by the time Tania Finship was sixty-two, and almost the oldest member of the faculty in her department or anywhere else, she had become beloved. After her disappearance, it became clear that, in the opinion of her colleagues and students, she had not known this. She had done her job efficiently, curtly, honorably, and without notable tact, and had undoubtedly considered, if she reflected on the matter at all, that the outrage and anger she heard from students who had not done well in her courses represented the general opinion. As is, alas, so often the case among human beings, who tend, whatever their profession, to substitute tardy regret for timely expressions of appreciation, Tania Finship was gone before anyone had told her that they loved her.

If she was dead, there was no evidence to say so. Had her husband wished to claim her savings and remarry, he would have been hard-put to do so before the statutory seven years. As it was, he mourned her, having always loved her and made his affection clear, if unspoken. She may have kept her professorship through tenure, as many disgruntled younger professors had been heard to mutter, but she kept her marriage because it suited them both: in the United States in those years one did not stay married unless one chose. Her children, grown and moved away, had come East when she disap-

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peared, and finally returned to the West Coast, keeping in close touch with their father. As to her savings, all she and Tom, her husband, owned they had owned jointly. It was already his, but, as he often made clear after the disappearance, sharing it once again with her was his only, his fervent wish.

No one could imagine what had become of her. The police were as puzzled as the F.B.I. and the C.I.A., who had entered the case on the thinnest of suspicions that she had been part of a spy ring. Her parents had been Marxists and Trotskyites in the 'twenties and 'thirties, and one never knew for sure that they had not become Stalinists and planted Tania for future spying at birth. Unlikely, but the C.I.A. is nothing if not expert at the unlikely. She might have waited all those years, until her children were grown, and then taken off with her ill-gotten information. What information a professor of Russian literature could have acquired in a blameless life was at best unclear, at worst nonsense. Still, she did read and speak Russian, and what is more she had been clearly heard to say critical things about the United States Government. Anything might be suspected of someone as profoundly anti-nuclear and anti-war as Tania.

"Which," as Fred Manson said to Kate Fansler, "is just the problem. The C.I.A. has got this ridiculous bee in their bonnet, but the result is everyone has just decided she's in Russia and stopped looking—everyone who had the ghost of a chance of finding her, that is. And the students are getting restless. They've heard her hold forth, and they're perfectly sure leaving this country or even her penthouse for more than a few hours was the last thing she wanted. If Tania had ever had any wanderlust, she had long since lost it, or so the students and her husband reported. The point is, can you help us? I've heard a lot about you."

"What do you think happened?" Kate asked.

Fred Manson heaved a great sigh. "I try not to think," he said. "The fact is, Tania was a bit of a burden in the department; conscientious, heavens yes, and hard-working, and highly intelligent. But she had taken to cultivating a crusty manner that was as hard on her colleagues as it was on her students. You want an example? All right: at a meeting of the curriculum committee some weeks ago, when we were discussing next year's catalog, I had to report that some man who had promised to teach the survey course next year was now refusing to do so. Tania was in charge of survey courses, and was considerably annoyed, as anyone would be at that

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news that late. What she said was: 'Couldn't we just tell him to go pee up a rope?' "

"I see what you mean," Kate said. "You're not suggesting that the man in question heard about it and abducted her?"

"I'm not suggesting anything; certainly not that. But it's hard enough to run a language department. They're the worst kind: for some reason those who teach languages become ornery from the moment they learn about inflected nouns, without having them talk nothing but mayhem, kidnaping, and worse. Find out what happened to her, please, for the sake of the academic world and my sanity. The department has discretionary funds, and the university will help, all on the q.t., of course. The university position is that she needed an emergency operation and doesn't want anyone to know. They may have to admit a scandal, but not before it's absolutely necessary."

"I should think," Kate said, "that the feelings of the university were not anyone's prime concern. They certainly wouldn't be mine. You've checked the hospitals?"

"Everything has been checked," Fred Manson said. "Everything. When my mother used to lose things, she always said they had disappeared into thin air. Of course, they always turned up fifteen minutes later. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's cliches enacting themselves. Tania's no where, God damn it, no where."

"I'll think about it," Kate said. "I'll let you know my decision in a few days. Meanwhile, may I talk to Tania's husband? Will he see me?"

"I'll damn well make sure he'll see you," Fred Manson said. Kate could not but reflect that, chancy as the Chair's disposition clearly was, this disappearance had done nothing to improve it. Could Tania have simply decided to vanish for the sheer joy of ruining Fred Manson's life and temper? Or could the husband, however devoted he was reported to be, have also inspired such retribution?

One hour with Tom Finship proved that supposition as unsubstantial as all the others had been. He greeted Kate in the penthouse on Riverside Drive he had long shared with his vanished wife. They had bought it many years ago, for a now (given the state of New York City real estate) ridiculously low sum. As their penthouse had risen in value, they had always talked of selling it and buying a house in the country where their gardening joys might really have scope. But the moment had never arrived. The terraces on the pent-

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house were large, and while Kate Fansler could scarcely tell a lilac from a rhododendron, there was no question even to her ignorant eye that this was an extraordinary rooftop garden. "The house in the country never quite worked out," Tom said when they were once again seated on the terrace after the tour. Kate, looking over the Hudson River to New Jersey and sipping the ice tea with which Tom had served them, did not try to hide her scrutiny of Tania's husband from him. He was in that state of calm which follows upon terrible news, but also in the state where talk is necessary and all but ceaseless. Kate, glad to serve as an audience to one who would be helped simply by talking, also needed to learn all he could tell her, which was the story of their lives.

"We would have had to trade this"—his arm swept to indicate the whole terrace with its rich plant life—"for a small apartment and a house, and somehow the whole thing never fell into place. God knows we had great offers for this place, but when we looked at the small apartments we could by then afford we began to feel cramped, cabined, cribbed, and confined, as Hamlet said, before we had even tried it out. And with a house in the country, Tania would have been there only weekends and in the summer. So we just kept talking about it. Now, without her—" He did not complete the sentence.

"It was Macbeth," Kate said. "Hamlet talked about being bound in a nutshell. When did you retire?"

"Five years ago," Tom said. "I was a professor at City College, and I just couldn't take it any more, teaching remedial English and being mugged in the parking lot. A lot of us took early retirement when the system, in order to get rid of us, made it especially attractive. And it wasn't really the remedial English and the parking lot, it was just that I'd been at the same game too long. As you can see, I've even forgotten my Shakespeare—not that I'd taught him since open admissions."

"Have you enjoyed the retirement, until this came along?"

"Moderately. The days pass. I like working around the house. I have a few investments, and they need looking after. I've always wanted to write a novel, but having all day isn't particularly conducive to creation, or so I've found. Funny thing, though, I discovered I really liked cooking. Tania always said she had the oldest kitchen boy in town. We had people in a lot, for dinner, drinks out here. It was a good life. Regular. It doesn't make any sense."

"What do you mean by 'regular'?"

"Every day was just like every other. Well, not exactly, of course.

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The days Tania taught were different from the days when she didn't teach. We joked: if Tania's teaching Chekhov, it must be Tuesday. And then every afternoon, when she'd come back from the university—she taught in the morning and advised from one to three—or just when the hour came round, on the days she didn't teach, she'd take her walk. Down Riverside Drive, across Seventy-second Street to Broadway, down Broadway to Fifty-ninth, and across to Fifth Avenue. Then she'd turn and come back, without the carrots."

"Carrots?"

"For the horses, the ones that pull the carriages through the park. For tourists, I suppose. Tania loved to offer them a carrot each, brightening their lives. It's funny how it began, really." Tom seemed lost in thought.

"How?" Kate urged him.

"She was crossing Fifty-ninth one day, she told me—going somewhere, not on her exercise walk—and a little girl got out of one of the carriages she was riding in with her family, to have her picture taken with the horse, and she tried to feed the horse a carrot, holding it upright, by its end. Of course, the horse took her hand with the carrot and the girl dropped it, screaming. To the rescue, Tania. She showed the girl how to hold her hand flat with the carrot on it, and calmed her down, although, Tania said, she couldn't convince the child to try again. That's what put the idea of carrots for the horses in Tania's mind. Also, it gave her a destination for her walk and made it possible for her to say she walked almost three miles every day—warding off osteoporosis, and other dangers of aging."

Tom fell into a sort of trance, staring out over the Hudson River. "I've been thinking," he finally said, "how we work so hard to avoid the dangers of old age, now that we live so long, and then, suddenly, we're gone."

"There's no real evidence she's 'gone,' " Kate said.

"I can't believe she wouldn't have let me know, if she was able to. Something terrible must have happened."

"You've been married a long time then," Kate said, not making it a question.

"We were married in the war. We both finished graduate school, and then the children were born. Tania taught all through those years; we needed the money. It was a busy life, but a good one. The children keep calling," he added, reminded of them. "I've gotten to dread the phone calls. 'No news, Pop?' And I always have to say,

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'No news.' She can't just have disappeared into thin air," he concluded in an unconscious echo of Fred Manson.

"What have the police done?" Kate asked, more to have something to ask him than because she needed to be told. The police had put Tania on their Missing Persons computer, and had made inquiries—perfunctory, Kate felt sure. There had been no ransom notes, no signs at all. Either she was dead—though in that case where was the body?—or she had chosen to vanish. The police admitted that, in the case of aging wives, this was unlikely. Amnesia? Possibly. But the hospitals had received no one of that sort, nor had the shelters for the homeless. Weren't there a lot of homeless women on the streets? God knows there were, and one could hardly question all of them, though most of them were well enough known in their neighborhoods. Still, no one was likely to report a new bag lady. The police shrugged, officially and metaphorically. Call them when there was a body.

After a while, Kate ran out of questions and Tom fell into silence. She left him finally with sympathetic reassurances, but without much hope on either side.

Later that week, Kate called Fred Manson and told him that frankly she didn't think there was much she could do. Just for the hell of it, she had walked Tania's exercise route, but no inspiration followed. It was a rainy day, and there were not many horse carriages lined up—just a few across from the Plaza, the horses, under their blankets, looking sad, and the drivers, under their raincoats, looking sullen.

Fred Manson was not in the best of humors when Kate reached him, and he told her, far from tactfully, that she had been their last hope but not, as far as he was concerned, a very likely one. He'd been told she had a reputation as a detective, but in his view detectives had their being exclusively between the covers of books highly suspect as to quality. Only Dostoyevsky had been able to write intelligently of crime, and he showed you the murder taking place—no nonsense about clues. Kate wanted to say she vaguely remembered a detective in that novel, but resisted the impulse.

"Well," Manson said, "I'll have to hire a substitute for her in the fall if she isn't back by the end of this semester. I've got an assistant professor filling in her classes, but it's hardly fair to anyone. Do let me know," he added unkindly, "if you're inspired with any knowledge of her whereabouts. I certainly hope she returns, but I don't

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mind telling you, it's the uncertainty that's killing us all." And that was the end of the story as far as anyone knew.

Then, just about at the end of that semester, Tania called Fred Manson and said she was back, she'd just been away a while, and she'd be teaching and everything as usual in the fall semester. Naturally, Fred wanted to know where she'd been and how she was, but she wouldn't say much, just that she was back and that it was good to see Tom, who was glad to have her back, the children were also relieved, and they could all now forget the whole thing and enjoy their summer.

Except, Tania added, Fred ought to call Kate Fansler and thank her, and apologize for being such a prick (obviously Tania's language hadn't been changed by her absence), because it was due to Kate she was back. She was never, Tania announced, going to say another word about it, but she didn't think Fred ought to have sneered at Kate as a detective. Kate didn't identify with criminals, like the detective in Dostoyevsky and other deep types, but she was damn good and Fred might as well say so. Fred did write Kate a rather gracious letter, and that was that for a long while. It was only many years later, when Kate told me about Tania, that I learned the part of the story nobody else had ever been told.

Tania and Tom were both killed in a car crash years after Tania had retired, and it was when Kate heard that she finally told me the whole story. Kate doesn't often fall into a reminiscent, story-telling vein, but she did that day.

Kate said it was the most patient, foot-slogging work she'd ever done. I like this case because I think only Kate could have solved it. Policemen and tough-guy detectives don't bother with cases where they haven't got a body and a bellyfull of hate in at least five suspects. That's what made this the perfect Fansler case. At least, pointing that out was how I got Kate to let me publish it.

Somehow, Kate kept finding herself across from the Plaza, studying the horse-drawn carriages. She seemed to have developed a new consciousness of the things; they stopped being a familiar background and moved into the foreground of her awareness. Many years before, she and Reed, when they were newly met, had hired a carriage and tried to imitate the proper romantic attitudes connected with them. They had ended up dissolved in laughter, at their own antics and the prattle of the driver, who took them for newlyweds and tourists, pointing out features of Central Park that Kate had

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known since birth. The ride had cost five dollars, which indicated how long ago that had been. The notices on the carriages Kate observed informed the romantic and unwary that the price was seventeen dollars for the first quarter hour. Despite these prices, business was good, to judge from the number of carriages lined up, especially on the weekends.

On a warm spring weekday afternoon Kate hired one. The driver was a young girl in a top hat, her blonde hair seeming to pour out below it to the middle of her back. Kate had approached the girl because she looked somehow easier than the male drivers to induce into conversation as opposed to barker talk. Her other attraction was that she had tacked onto the front of her carriage a neat placard announcing that she took American Express cards. The combination of the girl's attractiveness and Kate's lack of cash confirmed the matter.

"I'm not a tourist," Kate said, when they had turned off into the park at Sixth Avenue. "I really wanted to ask you about driving these things. It looks like every child's dream. Do most of the drivers like horses? Do they always drive the same horse?"

"Even tourists ask that," the girl said, smiling to make the words pleasant. "Some of us do, some of us don't, to both questions. Mostly we drive the same horse, but if we aren't going to be out, someone else takes over, on a weekend, say. I always try to drive this horse; her name, though you might never guess, is Nellie. She's one of the few mares; mostly they're geldings."

"Do any of you own your horses?"

"Not many any more. You writing a book or something?"

"Not even 'or something,' " Kate said. "I've just got interested."

"Why don't I give you the usual spiel without your having to ask the questions; would that help?" Kate laughed, sitting back, enjoying the slower pace and the sound of the hoofs on the road. The park was closed to cars in the afternoon, and the forsythia was out. Kate couldn't think why she hadn't done this before. Because, she guessed, one thought of it only as a couple or family thing, while it was (though she saw not a single other carriage with only one person in it) an ideal solitary experience. Kate asked for the "usual spiel."

"We all keep our horses in the same stable," the girl began. "The carriages, too. There's a good bit of turnover in drivers. As I said, we like horses—or if we don't, we pretend to. It would never do to be mean to a horse in the public eye, and we're always in the public eye. That last was not part of the usual spiel, as I'm sure you've

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guessed. There are rules regulating the treatment of the horses: On the hottest days in summer, they can't stay out too long, and they have to have water, and blankets in the winter. People worry a lot more about the horses than the drivers: I don't usually say that, either."

"There's a novel by Aldous Huxley," Kate said, "in which some animal lovers take an ill-treated horse away from the man who works it, and as a result the man starves to death together with his family. Nobody notices that."

"You a professor or something?"

"Do only professors read?" Kate asked.

"Nobody ever mentioned a book to me before—at least, not a book like that. In the summer when there are more carriages to go out, we get some guys from college as drivers. They don't last very long, but they've read a book. Probably some of the customers are readers, but they don't have books on their minds. You'd be surprised what goes on in these carriages sometimes, particularly at night—I mean, people make out anywhere. I like a little privacy myself, but it all goes with the territory, I guess. Anything else I can tell you? This trip's going to cost you already."

Kate agreed to return, and watched the driver pull out her charge-card machine and then write out Kate's charges. Kate signed the slip, adding a generous tip. "Thanks a heap," the young woman said; "any time."

"Do many people feed the horses carrots?" Kate asked as an afterthought, pocketing her receipt.

"A lot. Occasional children, though mostly they don't know how, and old ladies who are pretty regular about it. People used to feed the horses sugar, which was bad for them, although they loved it, of course. But the new diet mania in America has helped horses. Most people don't seem to have lumps of sugar any more; it's more carrots now, much better for the horses."

Kate thanked her again. "It's been a pleasure meeting you," she said. "I may be back." And she was the next day, and the day after that.

Kate got into the way of coming almost every afternoon with carrots for the horses, and sometimes an apple. After a while, she began to distinguish between the horses and to recognize the drivers, who tolerated her and even greeted her, a not untypical female animal lover of the sort they found familiar. But this one distinguished herself by occasionally hiring a carriage and taking a

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ride—not often, but often enough to keep hopes and tolerance high. The regular carrot ladies never rode.

Kate, of course, could come only in the afternoon, and not every day. Unlike amateur detectives, whether the effete upperclass English variety or the tough American kind, Kate had a full-time job. I've never really understood what a professor does who teaches only four to six hours a week, though Kate tried to explain it at me once. There are committee meetings and office hours and the need to go on writing and publishing and presenting papers at conferences. That spring, though, Kate devoted a lot of time to horse-drawn carriages. She's an animal lover, like all the Fanslers—I sometimes think it's all she and I share with the rest of the family—and she became quite fond of the horses after a couple of weeks.

There was one driver she noticed, indeed everyone noticed, who worked almost every day, including weekends, and who stood out because he dressed up for the part. He looked exactly like a cabbie from a Sherlock Holmes movie. He wore a black suit, a white tie and shirt, and a top hat. You almost expected someone to get into his carriage, hit the roof (there wasn't any roof, of course) with his cane, and say: "Victoria Station, driver, and hurry."

Kate took a ride with him one day. This was not as easy as it sounds, because you couldn't just pick out the carriage and driver you wanted. They lined up in order, and you had to take the next one. Kate thought free enterprise would have been better demonstrated if the customers were allowed to choose their carriages; certainly the competition would have spruced up the carriages and done something for the drivers' appearance; most of them wore old pants and T-shirts, which is what made the elegant man so noticeable. He probably would have had all the customers if the customers had had the choice.

But one day, when Kate came and began her offer of carrots to the horses, the "Edwardian" driver, as she had come to think of him, was third in line. So she sauntered along, feeding and greeting the horses, and chatting with the drivers, until her man was first. Then she hired him.

His spiel turned out to be as unusual as his costume. He began by wishing her goodday and asking if she had any place she especially wanted to see. When Kate said no, just around the park, the driver asked if she would prefer that he talked or kept silent. "And if I keep silent, ma'am," the driver said with, Kate was amused to notice, just the hint of a cockney accent—one expected him to say

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"Right you are, Gov'ner," but of course he didn't—"I'll still be here to answer questions, if any."

"I'd rather hear what you have to say," Kate said.

"Righto, ma'am," he said, turning sideways in his seat so that he could talk to Kate and at the same time keep an eye on the road and the horse. "This is the carousel. Been here over seventy-five years; they give the horses a bit of paint every so often, and change the tunes. Fifty years ago they still had rings you caught as you went by, silver rings but one gold, and if you got the gold they gave you a free ride." The man seemed to embrace all the park as he spoke of it, as though it were his creation; certainly it was his special pride.

"How long have you been driving a carriage?" Kate asked.

"Oh, most of my life, ma'am, one way or another. I was driving in the park before they ever closed it to cars. I remember when people were married at the Plaza and they would have a horse-drawn carriage ready to start them on their honeymoon. There were fewer of us in those days, and a different type, ma'am, if you take my meaning. I sometimes try to imagine what New York was like when there were only horse-drawn vehicles about."

"It probably smelled of horse manure and not carbon monoxide," Kate said, sitting back and enjoying herself as the description of the passing park scene continued. She didn't interrupt with any more questions; she mused. Wherever Kate is, if she's into musing, she muses. I like to think of her riding around the park on that spring day.

In the end, Kate paid the driver with cash; he did not have a charge-card notice on his carriage and she had come equipped with enough cash. "I like the way you drive," Kate said. "Is there a time I can come when I'll be fairly certain of getting you?"

"This is a good day," he said. I think it was a Tuesday. "If you come about the same time you did today, we ought to connect. Sometimes business is brisker than other times, so you might miss me, or you might have to wait. The other drivers are all good chaps," he added.

"I'm sure they are," Kate said. "I like your top hat and your line of patter, and your spruced-up carriage. Maybe I'll try again."

And she did try again, a week later. The spring semester was coming to a close, and Kate had to all but walk out on a meeting to get to Central Park South in plenty of time. It was not a particularly fine day, and the Edwardian driver was fourth from the head

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of the line. Kate sat on a bench with the other drivers—those were the only benches on that block—and corrected term papers while she was waiting. To her astonishment, she looked up to see "her" driver pulling his horse out of the rank of waiting carriages and driving off. Kate leapt into the carriage at the head of the line: "Follow that carriage!" she said to the driver.

"What? The horse-drawn one?"

"Yes. Hurry!"

"I can't follow him, lady. He's off back to the stables. I can't take no customers there."

"For a hundred dollars?"

"I might make an exception," he said, whipping up the horse. "But I want to see it."

Kate leaned forward and handed him three twenties. She'd really learned about cash and horse-drawn carriages. This was no moment for American Express, even if it had been the blonde young lady. "Here's sixty. You'll get the other forty when we're there."

But, as it happened, they soon caught up with Kate's Edwardian driver, who pulled over and acknowledged defeat, more with a gesture than anything. Cars started honking. Kate handed her driver the other forty, thanked him, got into the other carriage and said: "Back to the park, my good man."

The man had to go around the block to Sixth Avenue and head toward the park. Kate waited until they were through the traffic and back on the park road. Then, "Why did you take off like that?" she asked.

"It was the papers you were correcting, waiting for me. They rang a bell, somehow. Suddenly, I remembered having heard about you and knew who you were. They hired you, I guess."

"I wouldn't say 'hired'," Kate said. "I haven't promised anything. I can forget I ever rode in a carriage. I've forgotten less forgettable things."

"After all your trouble?"

"No trouble; a pleasure, in fact. And I remembered the gold rings. My brothers used to brag about knowing how to get them. They were already gone in my day. Is this the life you want really, from now on? And of course, there's Tom."

"What made you guess?"

"Lots of things. His quoting Macbeth mainly, though he thought it was Hamlet. Hamlet may really have been closer: 'I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space,

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were it not that I have bad dreams.' Was that it, or was it Macbeth: 'cribbed, cabined, confined'?"

"You mean you understand?"

"Lord, yes. But most of us don't have a dream to step into; we don't have a job to go to."

"I got to know this old man who drove. Met him when I was feeding the horses. I've always loved horses, not race horses or riding horses or herding horses, but horses that pull carriages. He wanted to quit, and I offered him enough for his carriage and horse really to tempt him, if he could get them for me and the right to keep them where he did, to live where he did, right close to the stables. He said at first he couldn't manage it, but in the end he did. I was offering to exchange my escape for his and I knew it would work if I was patient."

"Is that his suit?"

"No. This outfit is all mine. He was a much smaller man, wizened and disillusioned about the carriages working the park these days."

"What about Tom? The worry it's been to him?"

"He's been worried, but I bet he's also felt alive; something to think about, to plan beyond. It's brought a change to his life, too; it was getting too predictable. As to the department—"

"I know," Kate said, "they can all pee up one rope. When will you decide about going back? Not that I want to rush you."

"Once more around the park; on me."

And so they rode around in silence. The evening was drawing in. "You mean I have a real choice?" the driver said, looking back at her, and when Kate nodded turned around and continued driving in silence. Until they were leaving the park:

"Mine has been such an orderly life," Tania said. "I married when my mother and everyone else thought I should. Not that it wasn't a good marriage. We had children at the right time; they were good children. I guess working was the only unusual thing I did, and of course I became a language teacher, which was okay for a woman. Somehow, except when I was very young, there wasn't time for a dream, for an adventure. Suddenly, this seemed the perfect thing. A carriage, a horse, an outfit."

"You weren't afraid of being recognized?"

"Not in this outfit. People see what they expect to see. And I've always had a deep voice and a flat chest. Very good legs, though," Tania added.

When they pulled up at the curb on Central Park South, Kate

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said: "I get off here. I understand more than you'll ever know about how you felt. You decide it the way you want. I shan't say a word to anyone. And I won't bother you with any more rides if you decide to stay with the carriages and horses. But if you decide to go back, just call your Chair, dear Fred Manson, and announce your return next semester. 'Never apologize, never explain.' A good Victorian piece of advice."

As you know, Tania decided to return. And from that day to this, no one ever knew where she'd been and no one ever guessed. They were all glad to see her back—Tom, and the students, and even her colleagues—so she found out she was loved. Maybe that made her return more rewarding.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

After some years in the business world, England's Raymond H. Sawkins started in our field in the 1960s with a trio of novels about a policeman named Snow. I thought them fine. He then turned pseudonymous, offering a single book as Jay Bernard, and three good espionage novels about an agent named David Martin as Richard Raine. He first turned up as Colin Forbes, his most enduring persona, in 1970, specializing in non-series international intrigue and doing quite well for himself.

His latest, *Cover Story* (Atheneum, $17.95), is something of a departure in that he brings back Tweed of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service and Newman, a journalist, both featured in Forbes' previous novel, *Terminal*. It's just weeks before the 1984 U.S. elections, and rumor has it that a devastating defection is about to take place: a high-ranking American official code-named Adam Procane, loaded with secrets enough to eliminate a second term for Reagan, is preparing to go over to the Russians. Crossover point seems to be in Scandinavia, particularly Finland, where Newman's wife was recently murdered. A quartet of Americans travel to Scandinavia—one of them presumably Procane, but which? Tweed tries to block Procane and checkmate his opposite number, General Lysenko, while Newman, scheming in the middle of all this, is bent on revenge. A complex baffler, quite satisfying in resolution.

Samuel Holt (which is, it appears, the latest disguise for Donald E. Westlake) offers *One of Us Is Wrong* (Tor, $14.95), an amiable and involving tale of Middle East deviltry in Los Angeles. Sam Holt, briefly a Long Island cop, went west and starred in a TV series that ran forever. Well, five years, anyway. Holt made a disgusting pile of money and typecast himself eternally. Well, at least as long as his 6′ 6″ frame is likely to be remembered. One day, on the Freeway, four serious fellows in two cars try to kill him. Only later does he connect the incident with a murder story told him by a demented writer named Ross Ferguson. Well, if he wasn't demented at the time, he certainly became so later. And then some. I expect we'll hear more of Samuel Holt's Sam Holt. If not, it will be a crime.

Barbara Vine—whose real identity as Ruth Rendell is more celebrated than hidden—provides an intense and brooding and deeply felt view of family love and hate over the middle years of this century in *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (Bantam, $14.95). Vera Hillyard was hanged for murder in 1950. This much we know at the outset. The tragedy has now caught the attention of one Daniel Stewart, who proposes to make a book of it. He

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contacts Hillyard's niece, Faith Severn, and we see the years unfold through her memories and the accounts which Stewart provides. We go back to the beginnings of Vera's life, to the origins of her family, meeting in time its numerous parts, learning its passions and peculiarities. How could Vera, who seems most characterized by an intensity of love, have come to kill? And who could she have killed? All this we learn as Vine unrolls her fascinating tapestry.

Another pseudonym is no longer a secret. Evelyn Hervey, author of two earlier novels about the Victorian nanny Harriet Unwin and her penchant for solving murder and now of a third, *Into the Valley of Death* (Doubleday, $12.95), is H. R. F. Keating, from whom we more expect accounts of India and Inspector Ghote.

These Unwin novels are appealing portraits of their age and people, and if *Valley of Death* is not the strongest of the three, it makes an agreeable diversion. Unwin is begged to come to the village of Chipping Compton by her friend Mary Vilkins. The landlord of the local pub was discovered in circumstances which seem to admit of only one interpretation—his guilt of murder. He has been tried, sentenced, appeal denied, and is to die within days. Vilkins and others passionately believe him innocent and beg Unwin to try where all previous attempts have failed. And so she does, with insight and courage and an acknowledged borrowing from Philip MacDonald's 1930 novel, *The Noose*.

Bill Crider's first novel-length fiction under his own name (he has perpetrated one of the paperback Nick Carter series) is *Too Late To Die* (Walker, $14.95), and a worthy effort it is, making me long for a sequel. Dan Rhodes, an uncomplicated and likeable widower, is sheriff of Blacklin County, Texas. He's running for re-election against sophisticated opposition, and a messy murder, plus trouble with a subordinate, do nothing to elevate his voter appeal. Then comes another murder, and a threatened lawsuit; good thing Rhodes has a supportive daughter and a developing friendship with an attractive lady.

I'm pleased with Nan Hamilton's *The Shape of Fear* (Dodd Mead, $15.95), a second appearance for L.A.'s Japanese-American detective Sam Ohara and his black partner, Ted Washington. A Japanese insurance salesman is found murdered, and investigation shows that not only was his passing complex but so was his life—his income did not come only from simple insurance sales. Motives abound, and the matter is much confounded by a puzzling teenager found in the dead man's apartment, and by racial tensions erupting into violence and reaching into Ohara's own household. Hamilton handles diverse elements and strong characters very effectively.

Susan Kelly returns in *The Summertime Soldiers* (Walker, $14.95), her second novel featuring Liz Connors, teacher of writing at the Cambridge Police Academy, and Jack Lingemann, Cambridge

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homicide detective. No sophomore jinx here: this is a pleasing tale of suspense, well cast. The People's Revolutionary Cadre grew out of student unrest in the late 1960s, committed several murderous acts in 1970, lost one of its few members to the police, and disappeared into the underground. Now it is back, killing scientists from Boston's famed Route 128 companies which engage in military contract work. Starting with old photographs, Jack and his colleagues move toward the killers, as does Liz, commissioned to do a story on the Cadre. And the Cadre circles in on Jack, and then on Liz, with death on its little minds.

The latest Lovejoy novel, *The Tartan Sell* by Jonathan Gash (St. Martin's, $14.95), is a wild affair, undisciplined and in the end a bit less effective than its predecessors, though its characters are wondrously colorful. One of Lovejoy's endless maneuvers involving antiques goes awry, resulting in murder, so he flees, inserting himself in a traveling show. There he dreams up a very successful antiques flimflam, but warfare breaks out between rival shows. Since cowardice is his best-developed instinct, he runs again, coming at last to Scotland and Tachnadray Hall, headquarters of the impoverished and murderous clan McGunn. Transmogrified into Ian McGunn, Lovejoy devises the grandest scam of all.

Michael Z. Lewin's stories of Indianapolis, of private eye Albert Samson and policeman Leroy Powder, are just plain excellent. No lesser tribute can be paid to *Late Payments* (Morrow, $13.95). Lieutenant Leroy Powder runs the missing-persons bureau, assisted by an injured policewoman (wheelchair-bound), a hypochondriac, and one or two other worthies. A twelve-year-old boy reports his father missing. Powder's first flame, whom he hasn't ignited in decades, turns up with fires banked and concerns about her renter. A computer genius thinks he's found evidence of endemic homicide lurking in mortality statistics and wants the police to help in proving his thesis. A tearful couple has lost their daughter to a cult. A captivating array for Powder—a fine mix of curmudgeon and friend—to sort through.

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"Q"

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DETECTIVERSE

MORE GRAVE TONES

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a fence named Simon Hector,
Known in the trade as "The Art Collector."
When somebody yearned for a small memento
Of ancient Greece or the Quadricento,
Or somebody sighed for a Botticelli
Or a piece of a fresco by Signorelli,
Or wanted a Hals or a small El Greco
Or even a sample of artsy-Deco,
Hector commissioned a thief to steal it
And bring it to him so he could deal it
To the greedy, rich, obsessed collector
Who'd made his yearning known to Hector,
Thus yielding to Hector much satisfaction
And a tidy profit on each transaction.
Year after year, this occupation
Kept Hector abreast of the high inflation
And helped him cope with the costs of life
For him, his children, and his wife.
To wit: he fenced a Jan van Eyck
To buy his son a ten-speed bike,
His wife enjoyed a fabulous auto
From a sketch attributed to Giotto,
His reupholstered couch and pillow
Came from a street scene by Utrillo,
And when his life style grew too frugal,
He stepped it up with a Pieter Breughel—
Oh, on and on the list could go
From Goya to Caravaggio.
And then one summer he went to see
The noble wonders of Italy—
And climed to the top of what is really
Italy's loveliest campanile,
And tripped, lost balance, and clutched the fence
That bounded this lofty eminence,

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But being a fence himself, he knew
That fences don't do what they ought to do—
So, smiling inscrutably like Mona Lisa,
He fell off the Leaning Tower of Pisa
And now lies here, brought humbly low,
In need of a Fra Angelico.

Here lies Willie "The Shooter" Farr,
Widely known as a basketball star
Until he went in a single hop
From shooting baskets to shooting a cop.

This prison inmate, Mickey Trout,
Died trying to change the "in" to "out."

This is the grave of "Odds-On" Bell,
An off-track bookie who did quite well
Till one of his clients settled his hash
For paying off winners with counterfeit cash.

Here lies Smitty and here lies Chuck,
Thieves who hijacked a liquor truck—
And when they found how smart they'd been
To capture a load of high-priced gin
The miscreants could hardly wait
To have a drink to celebrate.
So they opened a case and sampled it
But neither drinker knew when to quit—
They thus met ignominious death
With a truckload of liquor on their breath.

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DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a spiritualist, Larry Pond,
Who claimed close ties to the Great Beyond.
For fifty bucks, he would summon the ghost
Of the dear departed you missed the most,
And make each individual spirit
Speak, through him, so that you could hear it
Assuage the grief and ease the mind
Of the dearly beloved left behind.
Well, an all-pro tackle one day came,
Paid his fifty and named the name
Of his fiancee, a luscious blonde
Whom he wanted to reach through Larry Pond.
She'd sung soprano in a big church choir
In a voice so high no one's was higher
Until she went to an early grave
By a fall from the choir stall into the nave.
This guy, thought Pond, is a lead-pipe cinch
To stand six-six if he stands an inch.
So he faked a trance and he tuned his ear
For the voice the big man longed to hear.
But while he plumbed the world Out Yonder
He must have allowed his mind to wander,
For the voice that issued from Larry's face
Was not a soprano but a resonant bass,
Which so enraged the soprano's swain
That he temporarily went insane:
Poor Larry, bewildered, not even defiant,
Was choked to death by his giant client.

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first publication in the U.S.

"Fellow at the office gave me the name of this woman down in Wiltshire," Mr. Dunnett said. "It'll be stuffed with animals. You'll love it, Miranda."

They bathed their daughter in their beautiful smiles, indulgent now that their own holiday was almost assured.

Miranda stared back at them. "Are there any horses?"

"Loads," said her father heartily, not knowing or caring. "I'll dash down tomorrow after the office. Fix it all up."

"Clever, clever *darling!" Mrs. Dunnett kissed him and thought how beautiful and chic it was to enjoy such a loving relationship with one's husband.*

A story that is something of a departure for EQMM but one we couldn't pass up for its unusual poignancy . . .

SUMMER IN THE COUNTRY

by NELL LAMBURN

Miranda. It was an unfortunate name. Mirandas should be ethereal creatures, silky-haired and fragile. But Miranda Dunnett was a squat child. Her skin had the unhealthy texture of chalk and her stringy, mouse-brown hair glistened with a film of grease despite frequent washings. A child warranting love, yet repelling it.

Her parents, like many physically beautiful people, were embarrassed by her. They'd expected their offspring to be in their own perfect mold, and the reality of Miranda deterred them from further procreation. They lived in a very small, very exquisite house off the King's Road, with an eau-de-nil front door and a Habitat door knocker.

Every morning, Mr. Dunnett went to the City in his expensively tailored suit, while Mrs. Dunnett drank coffee, lunched with friends

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at the Peter Jones snack bar, and occasionally did some charity work.

When Miranda was small, there'd been a series of au pairs: two French, a Pole, and a memorable Greek. After whom, to Mr. Dunnett's regret, Miranda was despatched to boarding school. She endured it as she endured her parents' antipathy and, because she was reasonably intelligent and adept at effacing herself, she avoided trouble. She'd learned, very early and very painfully, never to curry affection, so, in consequence, the other girls sometimes let her tag along. But mostly she was alone.

But the holidays were different. Three-quarters of each holiday she spent with her Aunt Elizabeth in Sussex, allowing Mrs. Dunnett just enough time to remedy Miranda's clothes and assuage her torpid conscience with whatever children's film was showing in an anonymous, suburban cinema.

Aunt Elizabeth bred Arabs, and Mrs. Dunnett was only a fraction less embarrassed by her than by Miranda. On her infrequent visits to London she brought an aroma of dungheap and horse that went ill with the elegant little house.

But with her Aunt Elizabeth, Miranda came nearer to happiness than ever in her life. Her aunt didn't love her, but she accepted her, just as she accepted the dogs and cats with which her house uncomfortably abounded. Sometimes, her aunt forgot about meals altogether, and, at others, grand and frightening grown-ups came to eat from tarnished silver and belaud the horses.

And it was for the horses that Miranda toiled. She watered and fed them, mucked out their boxes, sat with sick ones, groomed them, cleaned tack, triumphed in their triumphs, mourned their departures. Like her aunt, they demanded nothing emotional from her. They accepted her with liquid, peat-brown eyes, shivering their taut skins under her industrious brush and acknowledging her with the nudge of a muzzle or whicker of greeting.

For her it was quite enough. And, through the long weeks away from them, they remained her first thoughts in the morning and her last at night.

Because she was only ten years old, she could see no reason for change, and so when Mrs. Dunnett told her at the start of the summer holidays that her aunt was ill and Miranda could not stay with her she was unable to understand.

"But I *always* go. Always!" She struggled, uncomprehending, fes-

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tooned with luggage, across the station forecourt to her mother's Mini.

"Well, you can't. There's no one to look after you."

Mrs. Dunnett's distress was more for the prospect of her own ruined holiday than for her sister's cancer. "Though heaven knows what I'm going to do with you."

Miranda could barely breathe; she felt as if her body were being squeezed between huge pincers, her mind yearning for escape.

"But Aunt Elizabeth will need me—I always look after the horses."

"They're being sold."

One horse was like another to Mrs. Dunnett. "Miranda, please don't go on about it. You're not going, and that's that."

Hearts, Miranda knew, didn't actually break, but there was such agony in hers that she tried, in the privacy of her room, to feel if a section had broken away.

It was Mr. Dunnett who, two days later, solved the problem.

"Fellow at the office gave me the name of this woman down in Wiltshire. It'll be stuffed with animals. You'll love it, Miranda."

They bathed their daughter in their beautiful smiles, indulgent now that their own holiday was almost assured.

Miranda stared back at them. "Are there any horses?"

"Loads," said her father heartily, not knowing or caring. "I'll dash down tomorrow after the office. Fix it all up."

"Clever, *clever* darling!" Mrs. Dunnett kissed him and thought how beautiful and chic it was to enjoy such a loving relationship with one's husband.

It was only when he saw the signpost to Bishops Cannings that Mr. Dunnett remembered his old flame, Mollie Chichester. His foot hovered between brake and accelerator, and then he slowed down. A drink wouldn't come amiss.

But he had forgotten what an amusing, unconventional woman she was—demanding, too—and by the time he'd rediscovered it, it was too late to visit the farm.

Wearily he phoned Mrs. Dunnett. "Place is perfect. All set up. But the car's got a damned oil leak. I'll be pretty late."

"Poor, poor, tiredy boy! I'll be here waiting for you." The purr was audible to Mollie, and she sneered.

"Off you go, Junior," Mollie said. "I'll fix Mrs. Whatever-her-name-is in the morning and you can phone me."

The following Saturday, Mr. Dunnett drove Miranda to Wiltshire.

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It had been a difficult week because he'd had to appear so mysterious that even Mrs. Dunnett had said, "But, Poppety, you must *know* how many ponies."

"It's much nicer for Miranda to find out for herself," he'd said firmly and rather coldly.

Flat fields of wheat and barley lapped the smooth downs.

It wasn't like Sussex, Miranda thought, chilled. Sussex was cozy, enclosing you like a blanket. But this was a thin, cool sheet.

Mr. Dunnett drove the last mile slowly, in order to interpret Mollie Chichester's directions. Past the shop, then down a dead-end lane with a barn on the corner. Through the farmyard and it was the cottage on the left.

Somehow, he had expected it to be thatched, but it was red brick instead, an agricultural cottage of the 'thirties, starkly functional. The small front garden bore a rough patch of grass, littered with the skeletons of old cycles and scooters. Behind, the vegetable garden stretched with its interminable beanpoles and hearting cabbages, the long field grass pressing hungrily against the wire-mesh fencing, like beggars at a feast.

"Wait here," Mr. Dunnett said briskly. He'd have to chance that Mrs. Grant would not divulge that this was their first meeting.

"Mum's out." The skimpily clad girl who came to the open door let her blue-lidded eyes slide appreciatively over Mr. Dunnett's body. "Want to come in?"

He cleared his throat. "I've brought Miranda. Mrs. Grant was expecting her, wasn't she?" He smiled, averting his eyes from the girl's show of flesh.

The girl nodded, disinterestedly. "Mum works. She'll be back dinner time." She stood aside. "Want to wait?"

"No—no thank you." He was unaccountably uneasy. "I've got to rush back to town. I'll just get Miranda and her case."

"Here we are then!" He sounded bogusly hearty even to his own ears. "This is Miranda, and you are—?"

"Jane. Plain Jane, you know." Her smile demanded a denial.

"Jane's mummy will be back soon. She'll look after you—I must be off or *your* mummy will worry." He smiled, bringing himself to ease his conscience with a light kiss to her forehead. "Have fun, darling. And be good."

But unexpectedly Miranda followed him to the car, and it was a measure of her distress that she could appeal to him.

"I don't want to stay here, Daddy. I don't like it."

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"Nonsense!"

Miranda's eyes filled with tears. "I want to come with you."

"Please, Miranda. Don't be difficult. You wouldn't want Mummy and Daddy to miss their holiday, would you?"

"I could stay in London."

"Now you are being silly." Impatience and guilt sharpened his voice; guilt because, despite his shortcomings, he would never have left her there if he had seen the situation in the first place. But he was committed now.

"I really must go. I'll send you a postcard."

She watched him turn in the field gateway, and looked away as he passed her, waving. Then she went slowly back to the cottage. A faint smell of cooked cabbage permeated the kitchen. "Where are the ponies?" she asked and Jane stared at her.

"What ponies? There aren't no ponies."

"But Daddy said there were loads of ponies."

"Your dad's off his rocker."

Suspicion of betrayal touched Miranda as she stood in the tawdry little room.

"What's the dog's name then?"

"We haven't got a dog. Nor any other ruddy animal. 'Cept rats and mice." Unaccustomed pity touched her, awkwardly. "Oh, come on, don't cry so. I'll make a cup of coffee. How's that?"

But for Miranda, her parents' betrayal was complete.

In Bishop Cannings, Mollie Chichester murmured impatiently, "Oh, stop worrying about the child, Edward. I thought the place was all right, didn't I? I'll keep an eye on her."

Mr. Dunnett's stirring conscience slept again. "Would you? I'd be terribly grateful." He sighed. "For everything."

Nothing happened. To Miranda it was quite extraordinary. Never in her life had nothing happened with such intensity. Mr. Grant disappeared early and came back late from farm and pub, while Mrs. Grant worked at cleaning other people's houses all day. When Jane was at home, which was rarely, she drank coffee or did her hair or watched telly. And all through the day there was no sound at all except tractors and the larks yo-yoing above the fields.

Oddly enough, she wasn't unhappy. Her father's lies, his rejection of her solitary appeal to him, had successfully alienated him so that she didn't think of her parents at all. She mourned for her aunt and

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her horses, but hopelessly, as people do who have no means of remedy.

Beyond the cottage, a track ran straight to the downs, the whiteness slicing the hillside at an angle, like the piping on a hot cross bun. Tall buttercups grew in the high grass that hedged it, purple vetch and cow parsley, and each day Miranda ventured a little farther along it. Her solitude didn't worry her, she was used to it; she even came to a grudging liking for the flat sheet of Wiltshire. But if she got up onto the hill, then perhaps, oh, perhaps, she would spy a pony. She hungered for the sight of one like another child might hunger for sweets.

So it was that on the fifth day, she reached the bottom of the hill and began to climb. The track was much rougher here, lumps of chalk and angular blue-grey flints making walking hard and rough. Thorn trees patched the lower slopes; elders, too, with their white pats of fading flowers. Miranda climbed on, intent on the summit, her hair clinging greasily, her pale skin damp from the exertion, until the track flattened out across the brow. She flopped, too out of breath to focus on the fields below or a soft voice saying, "Well, well, well, so you have come up here at last."

In fright, Miranda scrambled to her feet. A man stood a few yards behind her, leaning on a long stick, smiling. He wore a shapeless black overcoat, his face beneath a soft felt hat was deeply tanned.

He said, gently, "I am sorry. I frightened you. But I have watched you every day, reaching just a little farther. Like a young rabbit from its burrow."

She stared at him, silent, unsure, ready to run. His voice was slow, with a funny lilt to it.

"It is good up here, don't you think?" He squatted, clasping the stick upright while Miranda stood uncertainly, wanting to go yet wanting to stay.

"You'll not see any ponies from here. No ponies for five miles."

She gasped, her mouth hanging open like a fish. "But how did you know? I never told anyone."

He shrugged. "No ponies at all. Except mine."

"*You've* got a pony?" Now everything else was forgotten. "Where? Where is he? Can I see him?"

"I've a dozen, here and there."

"But *where*? Oh, please—please let me see them!" She danced from foot to foot, hands wringing, and he laughed.

"In a while, in a while. First you must work, then you may ride."

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"But I can't ride!"

"You'll learn. You'll have all the time in the world to learn."

"I've only two weeks!" she despaired and he laughed again.

"Then you will have to work very hard."

"But what at? What have I got to do?"

"Sit quiet," he said softly, "and I will tell you."

After a week, Mrs. Grant said, "I don't know I like you being up there all day, dear."

Jane said, "What do you get up to, then? What's so special about Rannon Hill, eh?"

"Nothing." Miranda stared down at her plate. "I like it there, that's all." Terror squeezed her in case they tried to stop her.

"Your hands are all scratched to bits! What will your dad say?"

She shrugged, not answering, and Mrs. Grant's flicker of protest died in the dampening silence. The child was no trouble and the money was good, too. Stupid to upset her. She might come again, you see.

So, although Miranda left the cottage earlier and earlier and got back later and later, Mrs. Grant didn't protest again. But when Mr. Dunnett wrote to say he would collect his daughter on the 28th, she was unprepared for the child's reaction.

"I don't want to go! I want to stay here!" Miranda stood in the doorway, clutching a great bunch of leaves, her clothes and face streaked with chalky earth. "I *like* it here."

"But your mum and dad want you home."

"They *don't*." Miranda stamped her foot. "I won't go, I won't. You write and say I like it here, I want to stay all the holidays."

So she stayed, and when Mr. Dunnett came to see her, she was up on the hill so he went quickly to Bishops Cannings instead.

Miranda watched him go. It made her feel very powerful, watching and not watched. She'd done it once before, from a cupboard, when her father had thought she was asleep in the bedroom next door. She'd never told on him, she'd been saving it. But she might, when she got home, to pay him back for lying to her.

"So it's finished," the man said on the evening of the full moon. As always, he'd come so quietly that she hadn't heard his footfall. He stood above her, as she crouched at the last of her task, dark against the cloud-dappled sky.

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She nodded, rocking back on her heels, squinting up at him. It had never entered her head not to trust him. "When can I ride?"

Her wrists and fingers and back ached horribly, but it didn't matter. She peered past him. "Have you brought your pony with you?"

He shook his head. "He'll be here tonight. Can you come then?"

"You mean—in the dark?"

"The moon will be full."

She hesitated for only a second. Why not? She wasn't afraid of the dark.

"All right." Excitement began to churn inside her. "But can I ride tomorrow, too? Or I could just look after him for the day. I'd be so careful, truly I would."

He smiled. "I know you would. You may ride him tomorrow and the next day and every day. But there'll be one task more tonight. I'll help you then. It won't take long."

It didn't. He'd brought two wooden rakes and though she could only work hers clumsily, his moved easily and fluidly, gathering up rough grass as if it were wool.

"There," he said softly, standing back. "It is done."

He seemed even darker in the silvery light, a shadow amongst shadows, and for the first time, Miranda was a little afraid.

He stretched out his hand for hers, his skin as cold as the light. "Don't be afraid," he said.

"It's so—so different at night," she whispered. "All the color's gone. It's like someone has switched something off."

"You will learn to love it." He drew her up to where a knot of thorns patched the silver cheek of the hill like a velvety beauty spot. He made a curious clicking sound in his throat and out from behind the stunted trees a pony stepped on delicate legs. Miranda stared.

"But he's *beautiful!*"

His white body blazed in the moonlight and the man took her suddenly by the waist, swinging her onto the pony's glossy back.

"There! Ride him!"

She screamed softly. "I can't!" Panicking, she tangled her hands in the thick mane, really afraid.

"Try!" He laughed and the pony stepped forward. "Guide him with your voice."

She didn't fall. She didn't even slip. Her stubby legs felt molded to the pony's sides, her squat body balanced with his every movement.

"I can ride!" she cried in wonder. "I can ride!"

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"Go fast—go faster!"

The pony leapt forward, and Miranda went with him, easily, and a huge exultation swept her, a great release as if she were floating free, free from her clumsy flesh. "Faster, faster—" The voice of the man faded far behind her, the wind was raw silk on her cheeks, and, high above the sleeping farms, Miranda Dunnett began to laugh.

It was seven in the morning when Mr. Grant stepped sullenly out of the door. It had been a heavy night at the pub. It always was at full moon. He placed his booted feet very carefully on the uneven path so as not to disturb his head, and by the gate he paused, experimenting with a few deep breaths. He stared about him, as he always did, up to Rannon Hill and the downs, as if to reassure himself that all was as he left it.

"Oh, my God!" He looked away and back again. He stumbled, shaking, back to the kitchen door. "Alice! Alice—come out here!

"Alice—is that a ruddy horse up there or not?" He clutched her arm, pointing to Rannon Hill, and Mrs. Grant stared, dumbly, till he shook her violently. "Is it?"

She nodded, blinking tired eyes. "It wasn't there yesterday," she said defensively and he shook her again, accusingly.

"I damn well know that. How the hell's it got there then?"

She frowned, searching, by long habit, for a placebo. "There used to be one there, a long time ago. My gran told me."

"Your gran, my———. She's been dead twenty years. That horse is new—like it was done yesterday."

But Mrs. Grant wasn't listening. She was staring up at the hill through the thin pale light, and something very chill began creeping through her body.

"Bill," she said faintly, so faintly that even Mr. Grant listened. "Bill, there's something ever so funny about that horse. It's got a rider, Bill. My gran never said anything about anyone riding it. Can you see a rider?"

He could indeed see a faint chalk figure rising from the back of the leaping horse, hands entwined in the mane, head thrown back. For all the world as if they were laughing.

The police came. Mr. and Mrs. Dunnett came. Even Millie Chichester came. And Mrs. Grant, because she was frightened half to death, told them all she could.

For a while the shock of her husband's duplicity threatened to

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overwhelm that of their daughter's disappearance, and Mrs. Dunnett, in her Jean Machine cords and Wrangler shirt, said a great many terrible things that everyone was to remember all their lives.

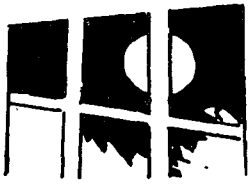
But if Miranda had run off then no one could find her, and after a week Mr. and Mrs. Dunnett packed her few belongings—her clothes, the photo of her Aunt Elizabeth's horses, her pony books—and left. They didn't notice the oak leaves beneath the mattress.

Mrs. Grant found them, though, and stood staring down at the crushed, faded leaves, and again the chill crept into her. Oak trees were magic trees, ancient magic trees. That was what her gran had said. She remembered the child clutching them in the doorway. But there weren't any oak trees within a ten-mile radius of the farm.

And who had cleared the old white horse up on Rannon Hill? Not one little girl, not all by herself, not when she never knew it was there. Then Mrs. Grant remembered the chalky clothes and the scratched hands, and shut the bedroom door quickly. There were some things, she knew because her gran had told her often, better left alone.

In Chelsea, the little house was as exquisite as ever, and every morning Mr. Dunnett went to the City in his elegantly tailored suit while Mrs. Dunnett lunched with her sympathetic friends and occasionally did her charity work.

But in the evenings and at weekends, the memory of their daughter trailed the mocking, tattered cloak of their beautiful relationship before them, so that they snapped and snarled and spat, for all the world like two newly caged beasts.



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The young man chuckled. "I don't keep any of them in my head. Be afraid of mixing them up sometime, calling the wrong one. I'm old-fashioned, too. I use a little black book . . ."

LITTLE BLACK BOOK

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

"'Variety of sex roles.'" Ned quoted, snorted. "I don't need any variety of sex roles, I do just great with the regular ones, boy." Ned turned, said to Johnny Tuttle behind the bar, "Another Jack Daniel's and remember no ice. If God had wanted ice to be in whiskey He would of put it there. —I'm just a plain old-fashioned boy as far as sex is concerned. My motto is to get all I can today and tonight, because Congress might pass a law against it or it might get all bought up by foreign capital tomorrow." He guffawed. Then his drink came and he politely raised his glass before tugging at it.

Johnny Tuttle was one of the newer, younger saloon-keepers of the 'sixties who had finally realized that Prohibition had been repealed long ago and hence there was no longer any reason for keeping a bar as dark as a bat-cave. Tuttle's was full of light from its wide, high, plate-glass windows, and naturally it was full of hanging potted plants, mostly ferns.

Ned turned back to the young man at his right. "I have at this moment, right at this moment," he said, "at least fifty A-Number One phone numbers right in my head. —Don't you?" he asked abruptly. He had been waiting for an opportunity. There are other things you can do in a body shop besides shop for an immediate body, particularly that early in the afternoon.

The young man chuckled. "I don't keep any of them in my head. Be afraid of mixing them up sometime, calling the wrong one. I'm old-fashioned, too. I use a little black book," he said, fumbling his hand in and out of his pocket, briefly showing the item.

Ned haw-hawed. "Boy, you *are*—talk about old-fashioned! Why, I thought that went out with men's garters." He looked at the two

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of them in the long mirror behind the bar. Bright hair just beginning to dim, complexion fair to florid, candy-stripe shirt, etc.: that was Ned. Slim, dark, hair longer, moustache dark and long, eyeglasses, attire informal: that was—

"Say, my name's Ned Cash."

"Beau Stuart. I've seen you here before."

They shook hands.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Beau," Ned said, getting to the point. "Trade you, say, ten of mine for ten of *yours?*"

Beau smiled in a perfectly friendly fashion at which it was impossible to take any offense, but he did not take up the offer and neither did Ned push it.

Ned turned casually to Johnny Tuttle. "Was Jerri in here last night? Little Jerri, with the light brown—"

"Haven't seen her lately," Johnny said, peeling lemon rind.

Ned nodded, turned toward the front of the bar, scanned it, heard his newspaper flop to the floor as he moved his arm. With a grunt, he stooped, and saw, lying next to the paper, the same little black book Beau had just shown.

But Beau's legs were not at his bar stool. They weren't to be seen. It was a second's work to slide the tiny notebook into the newspaper.

Having straightened up, Ned saw that Beau's eyeglasses and the book on varieties of sex roles were still next to his drink, of which he'd had several, so he'd probably just gone to the men's room.

Even kings must live by nature.

Ned paid for his drinks, told Johnny Tuttle that he'd be seeing him, went at an easy pace out the door. It was still early.

In his small studio apartment, Ned took a sheet of paper and a pencil and opened the little black book. He'd seen Beau Stuart in Tuttle's several times at night, and Beau had usually seemed to be doing all right. It was another motto of Ned's that Variety was the Spice of Life.

First, Ned eliminated all the numbers which were not local exchanges. He observed with approval, and indeed anticipation, that some names were marked with stars, some with two stars, and some with even three stars. Start with those, he thought.

"Hello," a man's voice said.

Ned hung up.

The next one gave a busy signal.

The next one didn't answer.

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"What number are you calling, please?"

"Uh—325–0723."

"Just one moment, please.—That number has been changed. Do you wish to write it down? 325–3473."

Ned hung up. He dialed the new number.

"Hello?"

Ned's smile was as genuine as if she had been right there in his room. "Hi. *Gwen?*"

"Who is *this?*"

She sounded interested. She sounded wary.

Pepper and salt.

"My name is Ned Cash."

And so on. Then he suggested they meet somewhere for a drink. And she said, "Bob would kill me."

"What, because you had a drink with someone else? Who's to know?"

"Watches me like a hawk," she murmured.

Pepper and salt.

"Well—does Bob work at home?"

She evidently pondered this for a moment. Then she asked, still wary, "Where *are* you?"

"Where are *you?*"

She told him. He said he'd be right over. "What should I bring to drink?"

"Oh, we've got— Uh, some vodka, maybe? And some Kahlua?"

"Fine. Be right over."

"I'll leave the door unlocked. It's a safe neighborhood, even though Bob doesn't think so."

He let himself in. Besides the booze, he'd brought flowers.

"Hi," he called out. Someone walked fast across the next room, came into the front one. It was a woman, though not exactly the type he'd had in mind.

"Gwen?"

"No, it's not *Gwen*, that bitch, that goddamn bitch, it's Bobbie," she said. "I warned her. *You*—"

Ned lunged for the revolver, but he had a feeling he wouldn't make it—and as it turned out he was quite right.

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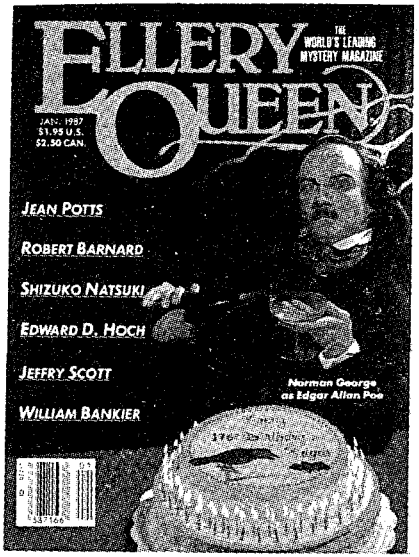

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Leslie Meier, EQMM first-story author #641, is happily married, lives in an old farmhouse on Cape Cod, and has three school-aged children. All of which you'll be happy to know after you have finished her story.

Lloyd said you didn't need a high-school diploma to wash dishes and clean the house. Or for loving . . .

I COULD NEVER SAY NO TO LLOYD

by LESLIE MEIER

People have always liked my rhubarb pie. Back in high school, my home-ec teacher, Mrs. Williams, said I had a light hand with pastry. That's what pastry requires, you see, a light hand—and I have very small, light hands. Lloyd used to say they were delicate. That's back when Lloyd used to say nice things to me and compliment me. He would hold up his big hand and I would put my little hand against it, and we would laugh at the difference. All that seems like a long time ago now.

I was only sixteen when we were married. I didn't even finish high school. Oh, I was a good student. I loved home economics and English and typing. But Lloyd laughed when I told him I wanted to put off getting married so I could take driver's ed and graduate. "Heck," he said, "I can teach you to drive." That ended it. I quit school and got married. I always did what Lloyd said. It's always been that way, ever since I first met him at the Rainbow Assembly.

How I loved being a Rainbow Girl. We always had a float in the July 4th parade. We would wear our beautiful white evening gowns and ride down Main Street, waving at all the people. I felt like royalty, like someone really special. The Rainbow Girls used to give these dances, called Assemblies. That's where I met Lloyd. He was

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so big and handsome, he swept me off my feet. He really did. When we danced for the first time, he just picked me up off the floor and spun me around and around. I felt so wonderful. He told me I was beautiful, that the white ruffled dress made me look like Scarlett O'Hara. I couldn't resist him. I could never say no to Lloyd.

So we got married. I didn't even finish my junior year. But it didn't matter, Lloyd was right—I didn't need to work. Lloyd made good money at the ArtMetal factory. He was a foreman. Like Lloyd said, I didn't need a high-school diploma to wash dishes and clean the house. Or for loving. Lloyd made a joke about it one time—he said I should get a diploma for loving.

He loved—I guess I can say it—sex. I remember the first time he kissed me. I could never say no to him, even though I mostly liked the hugging and kissing and being close. And I liked being able to make him happy.

At first, we really were. I remember one night when Sally and Dan Johnson came over for supper. I used all our pretty wedding presents. I laid the table with Aunt Esther's crocheted tablecloth and put on the silver-plate candlesticks. I put out the best dishes and everything gleamed and shined. We all looked so bright and animated, our eyes sparkling in the candlelight. I made a ham, and a cabbage-and-jello salad and scalloped potatoes. Everything came out real good. I made an apple pie for dessert, and afterward Lloyd and Dan drank beer and watched TV in the living room while Sally and I cleaned up the dishes. I knew Sally from Rainbow Girls. She was always fun. We sang old songs while we did the dishes. We harmonized and sang rounds. It was fun.

Looking back, it was the last good time we had. Because after that Lloyd lost his job when the ArtMetal factory closed. They just went out of business. There weren't any other jobs. A lot of other factories around here laid people off at the same time.

At first it was all right with Lloyd—he thought he'd find something else. But he didn't. He was around the house all the time. He started drinking beer earlier and earlier every day. And he got mean—he got so mean. He was angry all the time. He was angry at me. He didn't seem to love me any more. Maybe he was really mad at the ArtMetal people for closing down and putting him out of his job, but he took it out on me. I couldn't do anything right. No matter what I did, he'd yell at me, and hit me. I was so afraid of him.

Just look at me. I used to be pretty. Now I've got bruises every-

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where. He knocked out two of my teeth. I tried so hard to pacify him. I cooked his favorite meals. I tried not to talk too much so he wouldn't notice me, and he'd say, "Speak up, cat got your tongue?" So then I'd try to make some sort of conversation and he'd say, "Stop your yammering."

I didn't know what to do. What could I do? Where could I go? I couldn't get a job without a diploma. I couldn't even drive a car. There was nobody I could ask for help. Nobody ever came to visit any more. Lloyd scared them all away.

That's when I found Reverend Bob. Most days Lloyd would start drinking around eleven and he'd be real mad at supper. That's when he'd knock me around and then he'd pass out on the couch. So I watched Reverend Bob on the TV. I hoped he'd tell me what to do. He seemed so sure that God had all the answers. Last night Reverend Bob said that if we loved the Lord and sought righteousness, all our needs would be answered. "It's right in the Bible," he said, "Matthew 7, verse 7. 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.' " So I tried. I got down on my knees in my poor living room that Lloyd had knocked to pieces, with him snoring away, stinking, on the couch. I knelt there and I closed my eyes and I prayed for an answer.

But no answer came to me. I pressed my hands together and tried to make my thoughts fly up and out of my house. I tried to send them clean and pure, soaring up to God. But I couldn't. All I could think of, all I could see, was Lloyd lying there on the couch. He was unconscious, unawares, and I looked at him as if I'd never really seen him before.

He wasn't the handsome man who courted me. He looked ugly to me now. He had a three days' beard, his clothes were grubby, and his hair was dull and dirty-looking. His hand was lying on his chest and I could see his fingernails had grown long and there was black dirt under them. There were little hairs growing out of his nose and ears that I never noticed before. He smelled bad, like dirty clothes and stale beer.

I knew then that he was no longer the man I loved and married. If I was going to get out of that house alive I was going to have to depend on myself. So I got up and went off to bed, and for the first time in a long time I didn't cry myself to sleep.

The next day was beautiful and bright and clear—one of those mornings when, no matter how bad things seem, you just feel glad to be alive. I walked out to the garden and decided I'd better get

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some beans and things planted. It was too late for peas and lettuce. Looking over toward the compost heap, I saw that the rhubarb had come up and was ready to pull. I hadn't had much time for gardening because of all the trouble with Lloyd, but this was beautiful rhubarb, the nicest I've ever seen. I carried a great armful of it back into the house and sat down at the kitchen table and began cutting off the leaves. Soon I had a pile of stalks on one side and a pile of leaves on the other.

Then I heard Lloyd moving about in the living room. I swear my heart stopped for a minute, I was so afraid. But I knew that I wasn't going to be Lloyd's punching bag any more.

He came in the kitchen, and I must say he did not look well. He slumped down on a chair and I poured him a cup of coffee. He inquired what I was doing and I explained that I was making a rhubarb pie.

"A pie," he said. "That'd be nice. You know what," he said, looking at the leaves, "I'd enjoy some of those greens, with that bacon dressing I like so well."

"All right," I said, staying as calm as I could. "You look as if you could use a spring tonic."

So I finished making the pie and tucked it in the oven. Then I tore the rhubarb leaves up in nice-sized pieces and put them on a plate for Lloyd. Then I fried up some bacon and added vinegar and sugar and eggs to the grease. It's not the sort of thing people make much nowadays—too much cholesterol—but it is tasty. You pour it hot on the greens and they wilt a bit.

Well, I made the salad and set it in front of Lloyd. I will say this for him, he always had a big appetite. He just began eating that salad, just shoveling it in, forkful after forkful. I watched and held my breath, waiting to see what would happen.

At first it was all right. But then he began to cough and said his throat itched and he couldn't catch his breath. Then he couldn't talk any more.

He rushed to the sink and drank water, holding his mouth under the tap and drinking straight from it. Then he began staggering around, his face an awful blue and his eyes bulging. Then he crashed down, flat on the floor. The dishes and china rattled on the shelves and then it was quiet.

I took the pie out of the oven and set it on a rack to cool. It looked awfully nice and smelled delicious. I stood there for a minute or two, admiring it, then I remembered Lloyd stretched out there on the

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floor and I called the rescue squad. I knew it was too late for Lloyd, but in cases like this I thought you still called the rescue squad. I knew just what I'd tell them. I'd say, "Lloyd asked me to make him a salad of rhubarb leaves." They'd shake their heads and think what a pair of fools we were. Everybody around here knows that rhubarb leaves are poison. Except Lloyd—I guess he didn't.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Not for the first time, two stories that represent the first published fiction of their authors and arrived in our offices within days of each other have the same central theme—in this case a terrible, troubling theme. But the characters, tone, treatment, and resolution are very different in each story, just as the authors are living very different kinds of lives in very different parts of the U.S.

Carol Hair is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, currently pursuing a Master's in Liberal Studies with emphasis on professional writing and journalism. She teaches freshman English in Midwest City, Oklahoma, and says, "I am forty-one years old, but it's never too late to start something you have always dreamed of doing. I love writing short stories and, as you might guess, reading them." Ms. Hair has further plans for Sergeant Jill Slater, Special Investigator for Domestic Violence, whose thought- and emotion-provoking first narrative this is . . .

THE WRONG CHOICE

by CAROL HAIR

I stood silently in the smelly hallway outside the door to Apartment 365. As I listened to the muffled whimpering from the other side, I waited for the sound of a man's voice or the crack of a fist on soft flesh. If you'd told me a year ago that I'd be standing here with a .357 in my fist, I would have sworn you were a liar or, at least, a dreamer.

When I decided to become a cop, it was almost too late. I was thirty-three, teaching the psychology of family counseling at City College. I was bored and I had absolutely nothing to tie me down to a job I was starting to hate. I was alone, totally independent. My

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one lasting relationship was severed a long time ago by an exploding mortar near Saigon, and no one I'd met since had seemed worth the effort. Maybe being a cop was a way to make my life really mean something.

I graduated fourth in my training class at the Academy and they put me right to work—teaching rookies the psychology of troubled domestic situations. Big deal. New faces, but the same old line. I was bored.

Then one rainy fall Monday I found a memo on my desk. It was from Captain Walsh—Louie to his friends. Louie got along with everyone on the force, except for the loafers and the ass-kissers. If you tried to be a good cop, Captain Walsh would do anything for you.

I hung up my umbrella and raincoat and headed for the glass-walled box he laughingly called his office. He was sitting behind his littered desk, looking like a benevolent Buddha with his bald head shining and his hands folded across his ample paunch. I returned his smile and plunked myself on the hard chair opposite him.

"Well, kiddo, your ship finally came in." Louie pushed an impressively fat envelope toward me and leaned back, looking pleased with himself.

I held the envelope for a while, examining it and wondering. It was addressed to Sergeant Jill Slater, no mistake there. I tore the flap and pulled out several sheets. One held my Academy record. I found, also, a copy of my prior education and job history, with several lines underscored in red. Then I read the covering letter—and said:

"Louie, is this for real? If this is a joke, I'll never forgive you." My hands were trembling, and my stomach knotted with excitement. "You mean Mayor Dobbs finally listened to me?"

"It's no joke, kiddo, but His Honor didn't sign this because of anything you or I said. Somebody put some pretty tough pressure on the City Council and they leaned on Dobbs. No difference, though. The job of Special Investigator for Domestic Violence belongs to you. Nobody else came close to qualifying."

I'd seen the need for a special division to deal with domestic violence from the very beginning. There were too many cops answering family-mayhem calls who didn't understand the first thing about what to do. They usually did too much or too little, out of ignorance of the forces at work. Almost to a man, they hated and feared those calls. They were right to be afraid. An armed robber cornered in a warehouse is usually less dangerous and more predictable than a

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husband or wife in the throes of unreasoning anger and despair. A lot of cops got hurt on these calls, and some got killed.

I had the background for the job, and my police skills were the equal of any officer on the force. I wanted the special division badly, and especially to head it. Then I'd be able to do something real, something that counted.

I didn't tell the captain, who was looking at me expectantly, that some of those calls to the City Council were from me, and the rest were made by friends I'd urged and sometimes downright coerced. I had some acquaintances in high places—like Dan Kiley, who headed the Mental Health Institute—and I called in some favors. Well, it worked, and I didn't feel guilty in the least.

As the division was set up, all domestic-violence calls were routed to me, and I had the authority to choose who would go out. Sometimes I sent a couple of specially trained officers, sometimes I went with them, and often I went alone. Even with my experience in how the happy-family scenario can turn ugly, I saw stuff that made me physically ill.

I was able to get one woman to press charges against a husband who sold her sexual services to his fellow longshoremen to finance his drug habit. She protested at first, and he beat the hell out of her. So she just went along with his wishes—until the night he arranged a little party for fourteen men and assorted farm animals and she broke and ran. When he found her, he systematically and slowly touched every square inch of her body with a glowing cigar. The neighbors, no pretty lot themselves, got tired of the screaming and called the cops. That time I took several officers with me and we arrested the barbarian then and there. His wife made her court appearance and vanished, terrified that somehow he would get even. I just hope we keep him behind bars long enough for her to find a truly safe hiding place.

There are the frustrating cases involving women who don't really want to help themselves or us, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. And it's not always a man who does the dirt. One poor vet in a wheelchair was tied in a corner for three days while his floozy wife went on a bender with his benefit check and the apartment manager. We found him starving and sitting in his own filth, tears streaming down his face. We nailed her, but the pathetic husband was so desperate for love, or even the appearance of love, that he took her back.

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The children, though. They sometimes live through hell you can't imagine, and sometimes they don't live at all. I placed more kids as wards of the court in this one year than had been placed in the five previous years. If I'm a little crazy, it's about the kids. One of these days I'm afraid I'll lose control and shoot one of their parents. It's something I'll obviously have to fight, because good cops don't lose control, even for very good reasons.

I was working the night shift, as I usually did, when this particular call came through. The woman on the line said some crazy hillbilly was thrashing his wife and the screams were keeping her baby awake. I got the address and looked around for some backup. Between a couple of barroom brawls and the normal stab-and-shoot of the city after dark, there was really no one—that is, no one I wanted with me.

I signed out a plain black car from the motor pool and drove to the Sunset Arms Garden Apartments. A few cracked clay flower pots were all the garden I could see. Typical tenement, complete with cockroaches, rats, stink, and no hot water.

Upstairs, I found the door with 365 painted in brown, peeling numbers. I didn't knock. I never like to break in on the play till I know which actors are on stage. After five minutes of the pitiful moaning and sniffling and no voice that could be the husband's, I holstered the gun and tapped at the door.

"Could you open up, please? I've come to help you."

Sudden silence, then the sound of dragging steps across a bare floor. The door opened a few inches and frightened, swollen eyes stared through the crack. From their appearance, they'd recently been slugged and slugged hard.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Her voice had the nasal twang of the hill country. She opened the door wider and looked up and down the hall. When she was convinced I was alone, she stepped back for me to enter.

"I'm Jill Slater. Some of the neighbors complained about the commotion between you and your husband. They called the police and I came to see if I can help."

Her battered eyes took in my uniform. "But you're a woman."

"That's right, I'm a woman, and I'm on the police force. Tell me what happened, and I'll see what I can do." I can talk as tough as any trucker, but now was the time to speak gently, reassuringly. My training in clinical psychology enabled me to do this effectively—I could see some of the tension draining from her.

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She was dressed in a shapeless grey shift, rather dirty and patched in numerous places. Her long straight hair hadn't seen shampoo for a while.

Her slender arms and shoulders were showing black bruises, but her face was the worst. Besides the swollen eyes, there were angry red marks on one cheek and blood still trickled from her nose and cut lips. No doubt there were other injuries on her body—it was obvious she'd taken a terrific beating.

"Would you tell me your name? I want to be your friend, and I don't know what to call you." I was guiding her to a shabby chair. She looked ready to collapse.

Once she was sitting, she seemed to relax more. I didn't want to push her too fast, so I waited. Finally she drew a long breath and spoke.

"I'm Myrtle Wills, Miss. Me and my man Ezekial and little Pearl come here about a month ago. We lived back in Kentucky a long time, but Zeke got a callin' and we've been on the move ever since." Her voice sounded infinitely weary and so hopeless that I felt a moistness come to my eyes.

"Can you tell me what happened to make your husband treat you like this, Myrtle? It's against the law, you know."

"Oh, no, Miss—he had the right. He's my husband. 'Sides, it don't often happen. He was just upset I'd took a job. See, I looked around a little, while he was out, and this eatin' place down the street, well, they let me wash the dishes. I was keepin' it from him, and that was wrong for sure. But, Lordy, we was hungry an' no money comin' in. Pearl had got to have clothes for school, too, and shoes."

"Go on," I urged gently. "He was angry about your job and that's why he hit you?"

She sighed, then started and looked at the door like a frightened animal. In a moment she relaxed again, satisfied that she heard nothing.

"Zeke was mad 'cause he said I was fightin' the will of God. He said what God didn't provide, we didn't need. He said I was just flauntin' myself before all them men who eat at that place. I wasn't, though, Miss Slater. I just wanted to get a little piece of money." She was starting to cry again, strangled sobs.

"Look, Myrtle, I can arrange right now for you to go somewhere with your child where he can't hit you again." I placed my hand on hers. "He ought to spend a little time in jail to remind him that

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wives aren't for hitting. Would you be willing to sign a complaint against him and let me take you where it's safe?"

"No!" she cried. "Zeke ain't all that bad to me. He's just upset his work's not goin' so good. Why, once he loved me more than he loved God Hisself. When we was first married, he just couldn't leave me be. Then after I was in a family way, he was so gentle and nice. It was just after Pearl was born he got so mean-like and changed. See, somethin' tore in me when she come, and Doc Bowen said I'd not ever have more babies. That's what done it."

"Well," I said, puzzled, "that doesn't seem like a good reason for him to get mean. I don't understand."

"He's a preacher man, see, been so since he was a boy, preachin' brush arbor meetin's all through the hills. He said if there was no more babies to be had, then we couldn't, you know, live like husband and wife no more. Procreatin' out of lust was a sin. That was hard on him, Miss Slater. That man loved procreatin' better'n most any man I ever heard about! That's why he named the baby Pearl—he said she'd been a pearl of great price. That's from the Good Book. Anyway, he just got meaner and holier, jealous of any man who happened to look at me. Then he said we got to pull up and move where he could preach to all the sinners in the big city. That was five years ago, and we're still movin'."

"What about your daughter, Myrtle? Does Zeke hit her, too?" I looked toward a closed door to another room in the apartment.

"Lordy, no! He'd never touch Pearl. He says she's the only really good thing God's gave him. She's his reward for everthing he's given up."

"May I have a look at her, then, so I'll be sure?"

She nodded and led me into a cramped bedroom, switching on the dim light.

The little girl lay on a cot at the foot of the double bed, sleeping peacefully. She was wearing only cotton panties in the stuffy room, and her pale body was quite unblemished. I was relieved as we put out the light and softly closed the door.

Myrtle Wills seemed calmer now, and I was about to renew my suggestion of sending them both to a shelter when the hall door crashed open and I got my first look at Ezekial Wills.

He looked like everyone's idea of a wrathful prophet from the pages of the Old Testament. His long hair and beard were streaked with white and matted with filth. His pale eyes shot bolts of hate across the room, and when he opened his mouth his voice rumbled

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thunder through the charged air. "I cannot even go away to do God's work without that some spawn of Satan comes to corrupt my house." He pointed a bony finger at me. "Woman, look at yourself! Dressed in men's clothin' like the Whore of Babylon! Why are you in my house?"

Myrtle was cowering against the wall, yet somehow she found the courage to speak in my defense. "She's from the police, Ezekial. Someone heard our little misunderstandin' and called her. I've been tellin' Miss Slater it's all a mistake. Right, Miss?" She looked pleadingly at me.

"No one has the right to meddle in a man's family!" he roared. "My wife brung shame on me, and I punished her as God give me holy authority. I let worldly people meddle when they said Pearl had to go to their ungodly schools. I figgered to render that much to Caesar, but *no more!*"

He was blocking the door, so I had no choice but to face him. "Does your God tell you to beat helpless women? Look what you've done to her and tell me God wants that!"

"Shut your evil mouth, whore! My wife is my goods and my chattel, as the Book saith." He moved aside and gestured sweepingly toward the hallway. "Get thee gone, Satan! Never darken this door again!"

The man believed every word he said. I was afraid Myrtle and Pearl would suffer if I argued, and the old goat was too big for me to fight alone, so I tried for dignity and left without another word.

When I arrived back at the precinct, I arranged for unmarked surveillance of the apartment house. As soon as Zeke was out of the way, I promised myself I'd go back for Myrtle and Pearl, no excuses. Then I went into Louie's office and poured out the frustrating story.

"You're shaking just like my chihuahua, Jill. Lean back and calm down."

He hoisted himself from the chair and brought coffee from the pot outside the cubicle. I looked at my hands, and he was right. I held the hot mug tightly so I wouldn't slop coffee on the floor.

"I detailed Sloan and Jimenez to watch the place, and I'm going back as soon as the old devil goes out to preach," I said. "If I can convince Myrtle to complain, we'll pick him up. If not, I've got to get her to leave, at least for the child's sake."

"I don't doubt you've got a case, Jill, but we've dealt with the fanatic type before. She'll likely not leave him, let alone have him hauled in. And you said the little girl was okay. Go back and talk

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to her if you must, but if you can't get her to leave call off the watch. You can't keep two men tied up like that—you know we don't have the manpower."

He leaned forward to pat my arm. "I hope you can convince her. If anyone can, it's you, kiddo."

At my desk, I tried to catch up on the reports to child welfare, but I couldn't concentrate. I was waiting for a call from Sloan or Jimenez.

When it came, it was after midnight. Ezekial Wills was headed for the red-light district near the docks. Lord knows there were sinners enough there to keep him busy for a time. In less than an hour, I was again sitting across from Myrtle Wills.

"Myrtle, I beg you to take some action against your husband. If he attacked a stranger the way he did you, he'd be put away for a long time. It might do him some real good to cool his heels in a cell for a bit."

"No'm, Miss Slater. I'm Zeke's wife till death do us part. I can't do nothin' against him—it ain't right nor Godly. An' don't ask me to go leavin' him, neither. Me'n Pearl will be okay. He didn't do me no real damage, and I'll be very careful not to rile him no more."

"Are you sure, Myrtle?" I clasped the hand she held out to console me, suddenly realizing that this conversation was no longer between cop and victim, but woman and woman. "I can't force you, I guess, but I'm afraid for you."

"You're real kind, Miss—"

"Call me Jill, please."

"I'd like that. Jill—feels friendly. Please understand I can't leave Zeke. I do need help, though, and you're the only friend I got."

"Anything. What can I do?"

"Well, we need some food around here, and I figger you know about them charity places and such where we can get some. I can't say I'm pleased about takin' charity, but I sure can't get no more jobs. Maybe some clothes for Pearl?" She looked at her dress and shrugged. "I can make do, but I want my Pearl to look good at school."

I was pleased to be able to do something. "I can arrange for groceries to be delivered here once a week and plenty of clothes for both of you. But what about Zeke? I don't want him flying off the handle again."

"Well, now, Miss—I mean Jill, I done thought about that. I'll jus' commit a mortal sin and lie to Zeke, tell him the vittles and clothes is from a reformed sinner he hisself saved. He'll believe that. I don't

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know how many souls he's won, but he likes to think there's a whole lot."

I had to accept her plan, since I couldn't think of a better one. In order to maintain contact, I stipulated that she had to check with me weekly. I gave her my home phone number and a fistful of change for the pay phone in the lobby. She promised "on the Bible" and I left to make the arrangements.

For several weeks, I heard from Myrtle on schedule. Sometimes we visited an hour or so, Myrtle keeping me abreast of Pearl's progress in school and her own situation. She sounded happy, and I began to lose some of the fear I felt for her.

Then the calls became irregular. She explained that Zeke was home more because he'd tried to baptize a drunk in a storm sewer and got himself stabbed five times for his trouble. He was mending, though, and he said it was because of the good food his former "sinner" left outside the door each week.

I was very busy for two weeks, giving evidence in the trial of a kindly old babysitter who had permanently maimed one of her young charges by dunking his genitals in boiling water to "remind" him not to wet the bed. She looked like the photo I have of my grandmother. I probably would have trusted her with my own child, if I had one.

The jury debated for two hours and found her guilty. Then the judge remanded her to the county mental hospital for a year. At that, I came face-to-face with my own confusion. I suppose the old woman *was* insane to do such a thing, but something deep inside me objected that this wasn't punishment enough. I wanted to see her suffer at least a fraction of what Jimmy and his parents had endured and would have to endure in the future. I was ashamed, all of my humanistic training crying foul, but you can't deal with cruelty and not find yourself changing. And I was changing, day by day.

When the trial was over, I took off for a long weekend at home. But curled up in front of the fire with a novel I was dying to read, I suddenly thought of Myrtle. I hadn't heard from her in weeks. Should I go over there?

I'm not sure if I believe in psychic phenomena, but I can tell you that just as I was pulling on my coat to go over to the Sunset Arms, the phone rang. It was an almost incoherent Myrtle on the other end.

"Jill, Miss Slater, you got to help us!" she gasped between sobs of

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fright. "Me'n Pearl gotta get out of here right now, 'fore Zeke comes back. Take us to that place you was tellin' me about. Anywhere! But hurry!"

"Slower, Myrtle—I can hardly understand you. Of course I'll get you out, but what happened?" I was reaching for my phonebook with the emergency numbers of judges who could be reached for court orders during off-hours.

"It's been awful! He ain't healed up yet, and he's been around all the time where I couldn't call you. He's got meaner and meaner, slappin' me around and callin' me a harlot 'cause he says my body's temptin' him to sin. Then Miz Jenkins, that's Pearl's teacher, she give her some jean pants used to belong to her girl. Pearl put 'em on and wore 'em home. Zeke got mad like I never seen him before. Said that school's turnin' his Pearl a sinner before his very eyes and a bunch of other crazy stuff, said he was goin' for a gun and shoot all them sinners, then he was comin' for us. We gotta go 'fore he gets back!"

"Go to the lobby with Pearl and wait by the desk," I told her. "I have to get a paper signed, but I'll be only a half hour at most. Don't try to pack anything, and don't worry! I'll take care of you!"

I threw the receiver at its cradle on the run, and in ten minutes stood before Judge Peller as he signed the court order. As I rounded up the three officers I wanted with me, the phone on my desk rang. The terrified voice identified himself as the desk clerk at Myrtle's building. Zeke Wills had stormed into the lobby and spotted his wife and child. Brandishing an old twelve-gauge, he'd swept up Pearl in one arm and, after threatening the clerk with the gun, shoved it between his wife's shoulder blades. The clerk said Zeke had them both on the roof.

The alarm went out to all squads in the vicinity. By the time we arrived, the building was surrounded and searchlights pierced the gloom of the rooftop ten stories up. One pinpointed a shadowy form at the edge of the roof—Zeke holding the child.

One of the patrolmen came over to me. "Sergeant, we heard a shot before he came to the edge. We haven't spotted the woman. That probably means she's down. The sharpshooters say he's not holding the gun now, but if you try to take him watch out for it, anyway."

When we reached the door opening onto the roof, I motioned for the others to stay in the shadows. After my eyes adjusted to the strong beam, I could see Zeke. I could also see Myrtle. She was lying in her own blood a few feet back of him, the shotgun beside her,

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resting against her ruined face. I nodded the signal to cover me and walked closer to Zeke, speaking softly so I wouldn't startle him. He was holding Pearl tightly in one arm and maintaining a precarious balance with the other.

"Mr. Wills, won't you let me take Pearl? It's a long way to the street and you wouldn't want her to get hurt."

He turned eyes toward me that no longer focused. His mania was so advanced now that he appeared unconscious on his feet. He recognized me, though, and the pure hate hit me like a palpable blow.

"Leave us be, Satan!" he roared. "You done made me kill my beautiful Myrtle, whose soul you stole!" Tears streamed from those mad eyes, and the child, limp before, began to struggle and whimper. "Now I'm damned to eternal fire with her, but you ain't gettin' this pure child!"

"Mr. Wills, let Pearl come away from the edge and no one will bother you, I swear."

"You swear, do you, harlot? Satan's handmaiden is what you are! You ain't touchin' my precious Pearl—she'd be better dead and in God's lovin' arms." He turned back to the edge, so close the toes of his brogans were over the parapet. He hugged Pearl tightly to him, crooning what sounded like a hymn. Jimenez was off to one side, Kettering just back of me in the shadows, and Sloan covered all of us from the door. We needed just one chance to rush him when there was no danger of forcing him over. That chance came as Zeke stepped back several paces and bent to retrieve the scarf the wind had whipped from Pearl's head.

Kettering and I came from behind and Jimenez from the right. Zeke sensed the threat and jerked his head toward me. As our eyes locked, he thrust his hand inside his coat and out toward me in one fluid gesture. I felt an impact on my midsection and fell back full-length on the gravel and tar. No pain—just a maddening inability to move. A red-grey curtain of unconsciousness was lowering before my eyes, but I could still see Zeke's form dive out into the spotlight's beam, just eluding the grasping arms of Jimenez.

The next thing I saw was the moon-round face of Captain Walsh peering at me, anxiety etching unaccustomed lines. Seeing me awake, he relaxed, and his welcome voice surrounded me.

"You're fine, Jill. Don't talk—listen. You're at City General. You got a knife in your gut, but it missed all the important stuff. When your stitches heal, we'll spring you from this joint." He was trying

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to smile, to make me smile, and I felt a great rush of love for sweet, dear Louie.

I wanted to ask about Zeke and Pearl, to be told she was all right, but his face told me otherwise.

"They're all dead," I said.

"Yeah, kiddo, all three of them. You and the others did all you could. It's just too bad he didn't do his act solo, that's all."

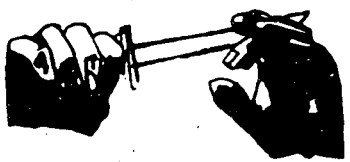
"Jimenez, Kettering, Sloan—they did all *they* could, Louie. I'm the one who wasn't smart enough to cut the red tape and pick up that poor woman and child before he got hold of them. Fifteen lousy minutes I wasted making everything conform to regulations, and now they're dead." I could feel the tears starting.

"Listen to me, kiddo. How many women and kids do you think you, by yourself, have saved in one year? How many?"

"That doesn't change—"

"Thirty-two positive saves! That's a winning record in anybody's game. I'd stake my pension on those odds. You lost three, and if you're staying in this crummy business you've gotta learn to lose a few."

I haven't completely come to terms with what Louie told me. Losing will never be an acceptable option for me. I keep trying to salvage my helpless people, dreading the next time I make the wrong choice or have bad luck. But I'm not about to quit trying. Quitting is the only way to insure that I never face losing again. I guess I'll just take my chances. I have to.



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WILLIAM BANKIER

Malta came after the gang, his face gone white. "Are you insane? This has gone too far!"

"Everybody cool down," Toomey said.

"He's going to the police," Mavis said.

"Thinking of it," Malta confirmed . . .

THE BRASS CAT IS NOT FOR SALE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The architects and the property developers were in disgrace. Commissioned by a Council desperate for accommodation, they had slung up high-rise apartment buildings in the Sixties and they would never be permitted to make that mistake again. But a cluster of the alien structures stood here on the wrong side of the Thames, where Mickey Malta's family, along with a thousand other unfortunates, had to live in them.

The young people retaliated for the theft of their streets and gardens and individual front walks and doors by vandalizing the elevators, breaking windows, urinating in the stairwells, and spray-painting walls with the deathless slogan, *Chelsea Boot-Boys Rule Okay!*

"Wotcha, Mick?" Toomey yelled across the road at Malta, who was waiting at the stop for a 19 bus. Toomey wanted to confirm what this one of his mates was doing today. The rectangular black box under Mickey's arm was a dead giveaway, along with the old tweed jacket slung across his shoulder.

"Trying some routines in the West End," young Malta said.

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Toomey shook his head slowly, as if his twenty-year-old patience was exhausted. "Bloody waste of time," was all he could say as he drifted off to meet Mavis and 'Ti-Bev. Maybe scrounge a fag and a cuppa. He had no work to go to.

When school ended three years ago, Toomey and Malta and the other lads had spent six months on a Youth Opportunity scheme, working at Rexby Paper Box. They were given menial tasks, sweeping, stacking, moving materials about in warehouses. The middle-aged geezers who had done this work for real wages were turfed out onto the dole while the boys carried on for fifty quid a week. The company was saving money, getting cheap labor. And isn't that the Tory philosophy—cheap labor so companies can make money?

The bus arrived and Malta got aboard for the drive across Battersea Bridge, through Chelsea and Knightsbridge, and along Piccadilly to where the tourists were thick on the ground. His audience.

This morning his mother had made a fuss before she set out to visit her ailing sister in Bermondsey. "Why can't you pass the hat?" she wanted to know. "We could use the money."

Malta was tired of trying to explain to the old lady how he felt about making use of Vince's makeup. His sister Connie had come to his rescue in her halting way, trying to control her breathing to get the first word out, her mouth going through weird contortions, forming the syllable long before she could speak it. But at last she got her voice going and told Mum to leave Mickey alone. Then she had given her brother a wink as she arranged the lacy collar of her waitress uniform.

Now, as the bus moved along the King's Road, Mickey opened the wooden box and looked inside. The sticks of greasepaint, their smell, reminded him of times when he sat on Vince's bed and watched his big brother at the dressing-table mirror practicing doing his face. There were quite a few theater programs and posters in Connie's bureau-drawer that carried the name Vincent Malta. Never in a starring role and not in London, yet he *was* working in the provinces.

But Vince had two moods. For weeks he would blaze with energy, entertaining everybody with his charm. Then he would slide through a few days of serious behavior into a trough of depression that was hideous to see. Connie, stammering, managed to label it correctly. "The living dead," she called it. Mickey could remember Vince in an upholstered chair, not changing position for hours at a time. Waxworks.

They gave Vince capsules for it and maybe he took them and they

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seemed to help a little. But the day came when Mickey was at the box factory and Connie was waiting tables at the Opal Cafe and Mum was probably in Bermondsey. And the first one home that evening—Mick—found Vince unconscious on his bed, past waking, the pill bottle and three beer tins, all empty, on the floor.

They had Vince cremated and spilled his ashes from the Albert Bridge into the Thames late at night. This was Mrs. Malta's idea. "So he can go all over the world. He would have liked that. Well, the oceans are all one, aren't they?" On the way home, Mickey was given the job of disposing of the plastic container. He found a trash bin, full to overflowing, and forced the cheap urn in among the empty wine bottles, tabloid newspapers, and fast-food cartons. If there was anything of Vince left, he would be happier here, Mickey reasoned, than lost in the seven seas.

Mickey climbed down from the bus on Shaftesbury Avenue within sight of marquees and ticket agencies. As he walked down side streets toward the public lavatory in Leicester Square, he clutched Vince's makeup tightly under his arm and imagined he felt warmth coming from the box. In the square, he hurried down the stone steps, paid ten pence to get inside, then locked himself inside a cubicle. There, using the mirror inside the box's lid, he began applying white greasepaint, smoothing it over cheeks and chin and forehead, leaving clear skin around his mouth and eyes. These areas he filled in with prepared burnt cork. The end result was a mask of white and black—comedy, tragedy, his to control.

He slipped into the tweed jacket that had belonged to Vince, who was very tall. The garment hung loose, sleeves half covering Mickey's hands. Then he reached into a special pouch Connie had sewn into the jacket lining for him and took out a collapsible top hat. This had come from Mossbach's shop on the lower King's Road. It had cost a pound, his only expenditure so far in this profitless enterprise except for bus fares.

Finger pressure caused the hat to pop into shape and he put it on at a rakish angle. It was the crowning touch. The raccoon-eyed mime looked as if he had stepped out of a surrealist film.

Back on the street, people were queuing for one of the big new cinema releases. Malta cruised the line slowly, moving to the music in his head. Reactions were varied and he played to them. A fat old lady giggled and tried to hide among her friends, so Malta fell to his knees, acting ludicrous Romeo to her shy Juliet. A burly gentleman pretended to defend himself. Malta became a boxer, all knees

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and elbows over elastic footwork, circling, attacking, retreating until he exhausted himself and accordioned onto knees, belly, and face, knocked out without a punch being landed.

The crowd was applauding each vignette now. Malta felt their approval, his soul was drinking it in. He was parched land; their laughter was rain. This was the best part of what Vince used to do and *he* was doing it now. This was what he couldn't explain to his Mum. To pass a hat for pay would mean—it would be something different. It would mean, "I do this to make money. If there is no money, I won't do it." All wrong. Mickey was doing it to take care of his brother.

Two policemen came and stood and watched. They had the power to move a busker along. But the afternoon was warm, the tourists were laughing, and there was no sign of a collection bag. So they passed on. The mournful mime fell in behind them, shoulders sagging, wrists pressed together to suggest handcuffs.

"We'll have you now, Mick," Toomey called as Malta approached the apartment building. The lot of them were scattered on the pavement and the patch of grass outside the open doorway of Poppy Glenister's ground-floor flat. There was Solaway and Breek and Clayborne and the girls in their punk gear, Mavis and 'Ti-Bev. Poppy himself, tucked into his wheelchair with his mean-eyed cat on his lap, was occupying the doorway.

Malta drew near, his face pink and still stinging from the scrubbing he'd given it with cheap soap in the Leicester Square lav. "Home is the sailor, home from sea," he recited.

"They'd never have you in the Navy," Solaway said, "you idle git."

"Let's see your takings, then," Toomey said. "How much did you make for your clever afternoon in the West End?"

"Didn't make nuffink," Breek said. "He's a effing Communist. Don't believe in getting paid."

Malta reclined on the grass beside 'Ti-Bev, using his brother's jacket rolled as an elbow-pad. Grass stains on it would only add character. "How much have you made today?" he countered, focusing on Breek. Breek was the one who did that nasty thing last month. Malta had been performing outside the World's End pub for the drinkers on the benches. It was going well. But when he made a sudden turn, he had caught Breek with a cloth cap in his hands in the act of taking a collection. Breek ran and Malta chased him through narrow streets, risking life and limb amid the traffic on

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Cheyne Walk, finally catching him and pinning the culprit against the embankment wall. The cap must have held a couple of quid in coins. Malta snatched it and dumped it over the wall into the river, the flashing, falling coins reminding him of Vince's dust spilling in the moonlight with the water below. Only this time the tide was out, so the money lay scattered on the mud while a dozen ducks came waddling, thinking they were being fed.

"You're crazy!" Breek had complained, abandoning his companion as if the whited face indicated plague. "We could have spent that!"

Malta had remained alone at the wall, peering down while the inhabitants of houseboats moored nearby turned from the drama and went back to their drinking.

Now Toomey said,

"Never mind who made what today. This is about what we'll make tomorrow. You know the brass cat in Mossbach's window? Tell him what you told us about it, Poppy."

Poppy Glenister passed his hand over the head of the black-and-white animal on his lap. The cat leaned into his stroke, one eye closed more than the other. "I'd pay a hundred quid for that brass cat," the old man said.

"Only Mossbach won't part with it," Toomey said.

'Ti-Bev made a face. "He says the brass cat's not for sale. Been in his family for generations. *C'est tragique.*" Beverly had spent a summer in the south of France and come back pregnant and with the nickname, 'Ti-Bev—the 'ti, she liked to explain, being short for "petite." She had managed to terminate the unwanted pregnancy but she kept the name.

"So here's my plan," Toomey said. He explained how a couple of them were going to slip into Mossbach's shop and steal the brass cat while the owner was outside becoming involved in Malta's act. "You know what a stagey bloke Larry Mossbach is, always doing the carry-on with his amateur dramatic society. He won't be able to resist. You'll beckon him outside and he'll come. There'll be a crowd of shoppers watching, he'll not say no to a crowd. And here's the genius—"

"My idea," Mavis said.

"You'll do a striptease, handing each garment to Mossbach. The old fool will swallow it. We'll be in and out of the shop and gone while he's camping it up on the pavement."

"One trouble," Malta said. "I won't do it."

"You will."

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"You must be mad. I'll never."

"Tell him, 'Ti-Bev."

"If you don't help us," the girl said, "Mavis and I will pay Connie a visit at the caf. Just a friendly. Two old friends chatting her up while she's trying to work."

The girls with their hair dyed green and pink, their spangled faces, their perforated leather garments, were not the sort of customer ever found in the Opal Cafe. Malta was frightened by the threat.

He got up, collected his jacket and makeup box, and headed for his own building half a mile away at the end of the council estate. "I think you've all gone round the twist," he said.

"We're friends of Connie's brother!" Mavis called after him. "We can go and say hello!"

Late that night Mickey and his Mum were watching the telly, a grand old film in black and white with simple police in it who did nothing but play fair and uphold the law while a youthful Dirk Bogarde crept about with those fishy eyes, menacing people with a knife. It was lovely. When Connie finally let herself in, she looked shattered.

"What's up, love?" her mother said. She was not looking very well herself, having spent hours that day on crowded buses to and from Bermondsey.

"I'm all right," Connie said, giving Mickey a signal that indicated she wanted to see him alone. So while the news came on and Mum began clucking and sighing over the day's disasters, brother and sister retired to the kitchen where Connie put on a kettle and they talked under the screen of its boiling.

Mavis and 'Ti-Bev had been to the restaurant. Not a major disruption this time—probably just a warning from what Malta could make of it. They had hung about for a few minutes, calling out comments, asking Connie when she'd be finished so they could go and get something decent to eat.

"Muh—muh—muh—" Connie gulped breath as she tried to control the word. "My boss is good," she said at last. "He's the only one who ever helped me. But customers were staring. If this keeps up, he'll have to let me go. He said sssssssso."

"It won't happen again."

"I could never find another job. If I haaaaad to interview—"

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"Hey. Hey." Mickey embraced his sister. "No interviews. You're keeping *this* job, love. I promise you. They won't bother you again."

The brass cat in the window sat. Run, cat, run. Malta's mind was racing, feeding on trivial visual material to avoid thinking about what he was doing. But the truth collapsed upon him anyway, like a condemned high-rise, crushing the wind out of him. He was an accomplice at a robbery.

The crowd had gathered quickly outside Mossbach's at the seedy end of the King's Road. This was not where the trendy boutiques were located. The deception was happening a couple of blocks past the World's End, in an area of musty shops that might have been demolished were it not for the revenue they generated.

Larry Mossbach, the owner, had been outside once already to suggest, half heartedly, that Malta move along. But he didn't really mean it. A slender man in green corduroy trousers and a sleeveless sweater over rolled shirtlseeves, and prematurely half bald, his open face gave him the look of someone in his twenties, although he must have been twice that age.

Malta had pretended not to understand, had done a proposal on bended knee, clutching the shopowner's hand to his cheek. Mossbach, the frustrated actor, could not help playing along, turning his head away, pressing the back of his wrist to his forehead. The laugh he got put him in the bag. The show was on.

There was still time for Malta to abort the crime. He saw Breek and Toomey on the edge of the crowd, hovering near the shop doorway. The others had stayed away to reduce the gang presence. But how could he rat on his friends? There wasn't just the danger of Mavis and 'Ti-Bev descending on the Opal to cost Connie her job. There was the morality of it. He was part of the tribe. If he broke the rules, he would have to go. Wouldn't he?

The trick worked like a charm. It was easy to do some business at the window and lure Mossbach out on stage again. The crowd gave him a hand and he responded with an elaborate, amateur-dramatic society bow. Then Malta began his strut, the exaggerated swagger of the striptease dancer. Mossbach caught on immediately. You could almost hear the raunchy saxophone and the erotic drumbeat as the mime slipped his shoulders and arms out of the buttoned jacket, let it slide past his hips like a dress, stepped out of it, and handed it to Mossbach.

The old ladies out shopping screamed with delight. Was he going

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to do it? Was the lad going all the way? Yes he was—shirt, shoes, trousers— Trouble was, he had on long underwear, the kind their husbands wore, with the droopy behind, so it was realistic if a little disappointing. They called out rude comments, making each other laugh even more. And Malta and Mossbach played to the reaction. Toomey and Breek were in the shop and out again like shadows, and the brass cat was history.

They met back at Poppy Glenister's. Malta was the last to arrive and he spent a few minutes in Poppy's grotty bathroom, washing his face and toweling down. When he joined the party, they were sharing tins of beer from the six-pack the old recluse had provided. The brass cat, two feet high, elegantly formed in a sitting position with its proud head turned away, was occupying a spot on the floor in front of Poppy's wheelchair. Mavis and 'Ti-Bev had dumped themselves in the upholstered chairs. The lads were scattered about on the floor, Toomey and Breek involved in yet another telling of how they did the dirty. "Off with those trousers," Mavis said. "They tell me you're interesting underneath."

Malta was offered a tin of beer. He took a taste and felt as if his stomach was going to send it back. The expression on his face drew comment. "I'm always this way after a performance," he said, leaning against a wall to keep from staggering.

"Now what about our hundred pounds?" Toomey said. This drew a cheer from the gang.

"Yeah. Gizzit in three fifties," Clayborne said.

They all laughed at that, then focused their attention on the old man in the wheelchair. Poppy Glenister had once been somebody. There were legends. In days of yore he had been a professional gambler, losing or winning in a night more money than this poxy lot would see in their unfortunate lifetimes. He had once had women, so the story went—sleek, costumed women getting in and out of expensive automobiles. It was said a jealous husband had taken out a minor contract on Glenister, had paid to have him kneecapped. A counter-rumor said the old man had fallen downstairs while paralytic from drinking whisky on Robbie Burns Night years ago.

Now he was sitting comfortably with his own cat on his lap and the brass one at his feet. Cassius, he called the purring beast because when it first appeared on his doorstep it had a lean and hungry look. Now, countless tins of tuna later, it looked and behaved like a Roman emperor.

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"I never thought you'd be able to do it," Poppy said. He couldn't take his eyes off the glittering prize. They sparkled like amethysts in his rocky face. "But there it is. I wanted this darling so bad I could taste it. And now she's mine."

"The hundred quid, Poppy." Toomey's voice suggested impatience.

"You shall have it. You're lads after my own heart."

"Now."

"Now? You're daft. Do you think I keep that kind of cash lying about? With gangs of young thugs roaming the neighborhood?"

This tactless reference floated above the heads of the young thugs in the room. Like young thugs everywhere, they did not regard themselves as young thugs. "When, then?" Breek asked.

"Soon as I get to the bank. What's tomorrow, Saturday? Closed. Monday."

"See you Monday, then. And never mind the fifties. Make it tens."

"That's right," Breek persisted as the party began to break up. "Eleven tens."

"As I feared," Toomey said when they came away empty-handed from the ground-floor apartment on Tuesday, having been turned back similarly on Monday by Glenister, who claimed he was ill. "I knew it all along. The old barstard is going to stiff us."

"He can't do that."

"He can."

"We'll go to the—" Then Clayborne stopped as he realized they were in no position to go to the police. "He's got us, then."

"No he hasn't." Toomey brightened a little. "Remember that nice stereo he's got? The one he's always playing those terrible Ray Noble records on? We'll have that."

"You mean break in?"

"Easy. Take the stereo and anything else of value."

"We can steal back the brass cat!"

"You twit. The police are looking for that. It's our insurance. We leave it with Poppy, and if he tries to report us we blow the whistle on him. He sent us to get it. Corrupted us, he did."

Malta could not keep silent. "Don't do this," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's wrong."

The boys put their lips together and blew out air and spit.

Next day, when the lads had collected their dole money, paid their

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parents, and gone down the road to have a pint at the Bricklayer's Arms, Mickey Malta stayed behind. When the coast was clear, he drifted around to Poppy Glenister's and rapped on the door.

"Who's there?"

"It's me. Mickey Malta."

"Stay away, the lot of you. I've got no money."

"You have, you lying old villain. But that's not why I'm here. This is important."

The old man opened the door a crack, leaving it on the chain. He peered up from his wheelchair, looking for attackers behind Malta.

"I'm here to warn you. They're going to break in and rob your place. They want to nick your stereo."

Something happened to Glenister's eyes. "When?"

"Soon. I heard them talking about tonight."

"Right." The door began to close, then opened again. "Thanks, Mick. You stay away."

Malta stayed as far away as he could. He sat at the kitchen table playing Hearts with his sister. Connie was calm. The punk girls had not returned to the Opal Cafe. In the front room, Mum was wheezing over a sitcom on the telly.

At ten, Toomey showed up at the door. His face was bright. "Let's have you, Mick. Tonight's the night."

"I don't think I'll go."

"Come on, we're all in this."

If Glenister had his doors and windows barricaded, the lads might remember his reluctance.

"I'll get my jacket," Malta said.

The gang stood about on the common land in the middle of the development, waiting for the area to go quiet. By eleven, after the pubs had closed, there was no more movement on the pavements. Breek showed the crowbar he'd brought to jimmy the front door.

"He's bound to hear you breaking in," Malta said.

"What can he do against all of us?" Toomey wasn't worried.

"He can't call the police," Clayborne said. "Receiver of stolen goods."

'Ti-Bev struck a pose. "He is *fini!*"

"Dead as a brass cat," Breek said, starting out in the direction of Glenister's place.

They came at the building across open ground, moving in a ragged line. They were silent, but you could feel the excitement. Poppy

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Glenister's window was dark. Breek went close to the door and began trying to insert the edge of his crowbar near the lock. The others congregated a couple of yards behind him. Then things began happening.

The door swung open abruptly, but the inside lights were not on. Poppy's voice sounded from the dark hallway. "Clear off, you lot!" Startled, the gang broke and scattered, stopping and turning a short distance farther away. Breek remained, the iron bar raised.

"You ripped us off!"

"I won't warn you again. Clear off!"

Breek took a step toward the open doorway. A gun went off with a smallish sound. There was a flash of light and Breek grabbed at his shoulder, dropping the bar.

Malta ran forward, hissing like a stage prompter. "It's me, Poppy! Are you crazy?"

"Get away! I won't have you coming in on me!"

Malta managed to find the crowbar. He brought it with him as he guided Breek away, cursing with pain and anger.

Connie let them in and did the necessary. She was good. While the kids crowded the bathroom doorway, she washed the wound—just a graze—and put on antiseptic, which made Breek gasp and made the others laugh. Then she managed a good bandage with gauze and tape.

During the operation, Mum came in from watching telly at a neighbor's flat. "We heard a bang," she said. "Margaret was going to call the police, but I said, 'Hold on, you never know whose son you're getting in trouble.' "

It was almost as good as getting paid, having this adventure to talk about. Over the next couple of days, the gang was in good spirits—all except the wounded Breek, who remained mostly silent, his eyes set deeper than usual and glazed over with an oily coating.

Malta, on his way late in the afternoon to put some clothes through the launderette, passed Toomey, 'Ti-Bev, and the others huddled out of the rain under the roof of the bicycle shed. He drifted over. They were surrounding Breek, who was on his knees, busy with scraps of red meat. He had cut it small and looked to be seasoning the pieces with a pinch of powder and folding them over. "What's all this in aid of?" Malta said.

Mavis said, "Duchess of Duke Street Cooking Class."

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Breek raised suspicious eyes. "Doing Poppy's laundry now, Mick?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Malta said. But he hurried on.

Next day the word was all over the council estate. Poppy Glenister's cat, big old Cassius, was dead. From poisoned meat. Who would do an evil thing like that?

Malta came after the gang, his face gone white. He confronted Breek especially. "Are you insane? This has gone too far!"

"Poppy put the boot in," Breek said.

"My sister harassed at the caf. Robbing Mossbach's shop. Shooting. A cat poisoned."

"Everybody cool down," Toomey said.

"It's gone too far," Malta repeated.

"He's going to the police," Mavis said.

"Thinking of it," Malta confirmed.

"Don't forget, you kept Mossbach occupied."

Malta thought about this for a while as the others watched him. They accepted his weird behavior as part of their interesting lives. "You're right," he said at last. "I'm guilty, too. So I won't grass on you lot after all."

The first copper he found was patroling near the bridge. Malta approached him and held his eye. "You better take me in," he said.

"What's up?"

"I have a confession to make."

Six months later, the waves had long since settled and life around the estate had gone placid again, if not stagnant. Mossbach's brass cat was back in the shop. Clayborne was doing time at a correction center. Toomey and Breek were on two-year suspended sentences. Poppy Glenister's gun had been impounded and he was bound over to keep the peace. A wise magistrate had put the pieces back together without adding too much strain to the overcrowded penal system.

As for Mickey Malta, his part in the affair had been treated with a dose of Gilbertian justice—they had found a way to let the punishment fit the crime.

On a bright morning, he left the apartment building with Connie, she on her way to do the midday shift at the Opal. Somebody—a rival football fan—had defaced the famous graffito with another color of spray-paint. Now it read *Liverpool Boot-Boys Rule Okay!*

"How much more time do you have to serve?" Connie asked.

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"Two more days. The end of this week." Mickey left her at the bus stop. He could walk to Mossbach's on a day as nice as this. "Ta-ra, love."

It felt good to have a room at the back of the shop with his costume jacket hung beside his old top hat, his makeup spread out on a table with the jar of cold cream and the box of tissues all under a good mirror. This must have been what it felt like for Vince to walk into his dressing room when he was with the rep. Mickey had his face half done when Mr. Mossbach came in carrying two cups of tea.

"Cheers," Malta said as he sipped and set the cup aside and went back to blacking his doleful eyes.

"Been a brief six months," Mossbach said.

"When the magistrate talked about restitution, I didn't know what to think."

"You've made a difference, doing your turn outside. My trade has increased."

"I'm glad."

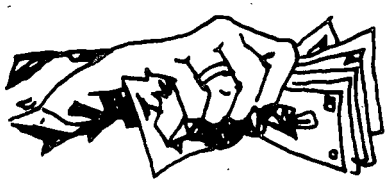
"I wish I could afford to pay you. Keep you on."

Malta thought about it. "How about this, then? I'll come as often as I can. A few days a week. I'd like to keep my hand in down the West End."

"That's lovely." The shopowner got up and took his tea with him. In the doorway, he turned. "And how about this?" His face was pink with something like embarrassment. "I can manage twenty quid a week. It isn't much—you're worth more. But we'll give it to you under the counter so it won't affect your collecting the dole."

"Thanks, Mr. Mossbach." Malta made his face serious. "You realize we'll be breaking the law."

"Wouldn't it be nice," Mossbach said, "if nobody had to."



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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Featured in our Department of First Stories in the October 1983 issue was "Locked Doors" by Lilly Carlson. When the story won the first Robert L. Fish Award for the best first published story of the year, Lilly Carlson revealed herself to be a very promising young writer whose real name is Heidi Vanderbilt.

"Locked Doors" was part of a larger work-in-progress. The riveting and troubling "Sammy" is part of the same work-in-progress. Marta and Christine and their sons Ezra and Sammy (the major characters, as they were in "Locked Doors") and the disarrangement of their lives, portrayed with ironic simplicity, make the story—and the novel to come—fiction well worth waiting for . . .

SAMMY

by HEIDI VANDERBILT

Christine Spencer stood in the doorway to the ferry's lunchroom, wearing the lynx coat her mother had given her. Its pockets were filled with magic coins. If she rubbed them together between her thumb and little finger something would happen, she'd forgotten just what. Maybe she should rub them and find out. No, better wait. She didn't need magic now. She needed a drink. Everyone needs a drink. "We are united in our thirst," she said and got in line at the counter.

She stood at the end of the line. That was important so everyone would see what beautiful manners she had. She could even speak French. She should be first in line. If people knew about her magic coins, they'd insist she go first, bow her right up to the counter. But they mustn't know. She was saving it.

She rubbed the sleeves of her coat, fluffing the fur. Underneath it she wore a lavender-wool dress. Her polished red boots, scrunched

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around her skinny ankles, matched her handbag, wallet, and the cover of her appointment book. She'd tied an orange scarf around the strap of her handbag and she wore orange lipstick. Her thin blonde braids were tied in purple bows. She had chosen her clothes carefully: orange, red, and purple—Hell's colors. She'd been there and she wanted the judge and those asshole social workers to know.

Perhaps she should have matching gloves. Her mother said that ladies always wore gloves, never smoked in the street or talked with a cigarette stuck between their lips. But that was years ago. Sometimes the way things used to be differed from how they were now. Are now. She frowned. Were then?

One cold, wet, blowy October day when she was ten, a day like today, there had been an exhibition of tumbling at her school—athletes somersaulted around the gym. Now time behaved like that, flip-flopping. What if it didn't land right?

What, she had wondered, did the gymnasts see when they turned? Did they keep their eyes open? She had decided to try it herself.

"Look, Mummy!" She ran, jumped, flipped, and fell. Her head cracked against the parquet floor. She heard a shriek. Her mother was laughing.

"Oh, Chrissy, you're so funny!" Christine had never seen tears in her mother's eyes before. "What a treat! Wipe your mouth, dear. It's bleeding." Her mother handed her a tissue. Christine stared up at the smiling face. "Do what I say. I'm all you've got," her mother told her, poking the tissue at Christine's bitten lip. "I'm all you'll ever have."

That wasn't true, because now Christine had money. An inheritance, the lawyers said, from her mother's estate. That was part of the hoax, there was no estate. But she did have a lot of money. Every month her mother's San Diego bank sent her a check, in care of wherever she was. The boat rocked, even at the dock. It would be a rough passage. Christine stared at the sign on the wall over the hotdog steamer: NO BOOZE TIL WE CROOZE. She reached into the left sleeve of her coat and pulled her dress sleeve down to cover the tattoo on her wrist. She loved it, but that pasty-faced social worker Belinda wouldn't get it at all.

Which reminded her. She opened her Week-At-a-Glance book, flipped through until she found this week: October 27–November 2. She peeked around the lunchroom to see who was watching. No one that she could spot, but you could never tell, could you? The tables were filling up. People pulled raincoats off, shook them, laid them

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over the backs of the molded green-plastic seats. Three white-haired ladies, shopping bags at their feet, sat knitting and chattering like their teeth were loose. Two men Christine's age—she'd be thirty this Friday—played gin, slapping tattered cards onto the table. A little blond boy who looked like Sammy when he was little ran a matchbox car across his mother's shoulders.

Someone was watching her, she could feel it. She cupped her hand around the engagement book and brought it close to her face. Monday, October 28. Today. Today sat in the upper left of the page, bare. Friday, November 1, sat halfway down the right-hand side. She'd written "COURT" in big red letters on that day. Red-letter day. Above and again beside "COURT" she'd written "ME" in orange. The "ME" beside it meant she had to go to court that day, get Sammy back. The "ME" above it meant it was her birthday. On Saturday and Sunday she'd written, "PARTYPARTYPARTY". She didn't know where she'd party, but afterward she and Sam would hit the road.

The noise in the lunchroom annoyed her. She could barely hear her mother's voice, faded as an empty old armchair, reminding her to look at Wednesday. Christine glanced around for her mother; she always did when she hadn't heard the voice in a while.

Christine squinted at the tiny handwriting she called her good-girl script: "1:45—Social Worker Belinda Grey—Conference." Belinda stole children. Belinda didn't drink, and she sniffed at Christine like she smelled rubber burning.

Belinda would hate the tattoo. Christine looked at her wrist. The face of an electrified cat glared back: spiky ears and fur rose up her forearm and startled, slitted eyes peered into her own. Color them blue and they could be mine.

"Face it, Chrissy." Her mother's voice. "If Belinda were any, you know, brighter, she wouldn't be doing such tacky work." Her mother always said that: about phone operators, maids, nurses, teachers. For teachers she amended it to: "If she could *do* it, she'd be *doing* it, not telling *you* how to do it." When Christine's school called to complain about her homework, her behavior, her relationships with other children, her mother told them: "I pay *you* to educate her. That's *your* job, not mine. If you can't, I'll find another school that can."

Christine turned to the front of her engagement book. She pulled a plastic-sealed newspaper article from the paperclip on the first

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page. Above a picture of her mother, the black type read: CHARLOTTE SPENCER, 63, DEAD IN PLANE CRASH.

That clipping had been planted in the papers by the social workers. They wanted her to believe her mother was dead so they could call her crazy and steal Sammy. So clever, using her mother for leverage. The clipping was dated three years earlier, when her mother moved to New York. But they weren't going to fool her. Others had tried—that navy-blue lawyer with the phony will, her dog-piss brother, wet-eyed and weeping like an Italian tenor. Others, too. For years. So what made this idiot social worker think she could get away with it? Who would know better than Christine whether her mother was dead or not?

God, she wanted a drink. The ferry listed hard—a heavy truck being loaded—and Christine felt her hand fall into her bag. It rummaged for her flask and pulled it out. A wad of Kleenex and rolling papers fell to the floor. She made sure she hadn't dropped any dope. She didn't pick up what had fallen.

She unscrewed the bottle's top and drank what was left of the schnapps. Not enough.

She'd been drinking schnapps when Belinda and two policemen and Marta came for Sammy. She'd thought Marta was her friend. "Marta, my friend," she used to say in the months before they took Sammy away—"My Marta-friend. Have a drink with me. A toast, why don't we? To Sammy!" She'd loaned Sammy to Marta, not for keeps. She'd never give Sammy away. He was her Teddy Bear, her Nudie Bear, her Worm.

The damned flask had tricked her again, pretending to be full. Now the lunchroom was full of people waiting to float home. Christine recognized several who pretended not to see her. A man and woman whispered about her. Christine imagined them in bed together, double-hung like casement windows, sliding up and down, letting in air.

She was coming home for her birthday. She'd planned carefully. She'd be on-island the whole week before. That would give everyone time to get ready. Of course, she knew what they were giving her even though it was supposed to be a surprise. She loved surprises. This wasn't going to be one, but that was okay. She'd pretend. Everyone had worked so hard setting it up. Darling judge.

She rattled the coins in her pocket, felt a small oval capsule, and took it out to examine it. One half yellow, the other half blue. She

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tried to read the tiny letters but they'd mostly rubbed off. She swallowed it dry.

The boat creaked against its mooring. Two of the old ladies made seasick faces at each other and laughed. And there, next to them, old Mr. Porter sat on the radiator, bouncing a ball attached by a rubber string to a paddle.

Christine's mother said Mr. Porter came from a good family. He had married a rich girl and they had a daughter. Then one day he stopped talking—no one knew why, her mother said, except perhaps his wife.

"His wife left him, of course," her mother told her. "She took little Arabella and *finally* got her into a decent school. That child was *not* bright. But they had money. Oh, my *dear*, did they have money! Now all Porter does is play with that *thing* of his."

Christine saluted Mr. Porter with her empty flask. He paddled the ball at her. He could be a judge, Christine thought. She bowed to him.

Her nose came too close to the man in front of her. He smelled of hotdogs and mustard. She didn't like hotdogs. Little wieners.

"I don't like beaners," she said and the man turned around.

"Huh?"

It was important to be polite. Was it polite to tell someone he smelled? She frowned at him and put her fingers in her mouth, delicately, one after the other. She was hungry now she thought about it. She wanted ice cream. She could rub her coins together and have a magic dessert. Chocolate, strawberry, nabana. No. Banana.

"I must have ice cream," she said.

"I'd settle for a drink." He pointed at the NO BOOZE TIL WE CROOZE sign. "But they don't serve until we leave port."

Leave port? He'd said he *wanted* a drink. What did he mean? He must mean he didn't want port. That was okay, she didn't like port, either. Dubonnet, maybe. Schnapps, perhaps.

"Take it or leave it." She hadn't meant to shout.

The man turned away from her. The little blond boy ran his matchbox car over the man's foot, up his leg to his stomach. The man picked up the child, settled him on his hip, and kissed him.

Christine took another drag on the empty flask. She ran her tongue inside its neck. Maybe the man wasn't really dead. If he turned around again, maybe his eyes could send signals into hers.

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Morse code. She studied his back. Of course! Dr. Morse, of course! Sammy's doctor! Just the person she wanted to see.

"You have to help Sammy—" But she couldn't remember what was wrong with Sammy. "Help Sammy!"

The woman in front of Dr. Morse turned around. "Hello, Christine," she said. She was fat as a lifeboat and Christine didn't like her. She wanted to talk to Dr. Morse some more, but he faced front, holding the little boy, ignoring her.

The fat woman spoke again, her words lining themselves up next to her mouth in loops and wriggles. Christine squinted. The words lay in the air.

"We got a table on the deck below," the woman's words announced. "Me and Luther. You're welcome to join us."

"Thank you," Christine said.

She felt through the coins in her pockets to see if there were any more capsules. There was one at the bottom, in the lint. She swallowed it.

The PA system screeched on. "CAST OFF!" the captain shouted, as though the passengers were the crew.

The fat woman turned to the counter. She wore a red rain-poncho, hood up, droplets of rain snaking down it.

The ferry pulled away from the dock, rocking. Christine's mother used to rock her, didn't she?

Two women behind the counter began serving. Beer caps popped, splits twisted open, wine splashed, glasses slid over the counter. The line moved.

A small man with red-rimmed eyes joined the fat woman.

"That damned jenny mule of yours is kickin' out the trailer," he shouted over the engines and the passengers' clamor.

"Not my mule." the fat woman said.

"What we need another jenny for, I don't know," he said. "Won't have no trailer, neither, time we dock. Just splinters 'n wheels 'n an axle worth shit."

He rocked on his heels, hands in his overalls pockets. The fat woman smiled and patted his arm. Christine tried to remember her name. Jane? They had a big farm somewhere on the west side of the island. A big, messy farm with pigs and cows, draft horses in muddy fields, and a little stand where they sold eggs and cream and herbs. Not Jane. Anne? That was it, Anne.

"Luther, that's one good-lookin' animal," Anne said. "And you know it."

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"No such thing."

"She'll break nice."

Luther snorted. That was how to talk to animals, Christine knew. You snort up their noses, they snort back.

She sucked on her fingers, then remembered the nips she'd taken from the plane. She unzipped the cosmetics case in her handbag and got out one scotch, one vodka. She drank the scotch first, then the vodka. Nips were ridiculous, just sips. She got out two more, rum and gin.

Cards slapped on the table behind her. "Gin!"

She giggled. Exactly.

"Look who's here, Luther." The fat woman's words slipped out of her mouth. "It's Christine. You remember Luther, don't you, Chris?"

Before Christine could figure out what to say, Anne leaned close to her.

"You comin' to try and get Sammy back? Imagine him being took from you after all these years. How old is he now? Six? Seven?"

"Seven," Christine said.

"You'd think they'd of took him younger if they was going to take him at all," Anne said.

"Hush." Luther poked her. Then he smiled, showing spaces between tobacco-yellow teeth. "'Lo, Christine."

Anne had reminded Christine why she wanted to speak to Dr. Morse. Sammy would need a checkup, now he was being given back to her, her birthday present, all dressed up wearing a bow so she'd know he was hers.

She tapped Dr. Morse's shoulder, but when he turned he was just a corpse carrying a little boy on its hip. The child's eyes were blue like hers, like Sammy's, his lashes black and thick. She wondered why he wasn't crying, perched on a dead man. She wanted to cry.

"Marta sleeps with Sammy," Christine whispered. "Did you know that? Has him in her bed, and her boy, too."

"That a fact?" Luther asked.

His fat wife said, "Goodness!"

Christine jingled her magic coins. "One, two, *three!*" she said. "You can't fool *me!*"

The little boy rested his chin on his father's shoulder. He looked at her, his eyes so large she could see all of Sammy standing up in them. She felt his eyes grow inside her—grow and grow until she felt they would burst her open.

She blinked.

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The line moved. Dr. Morse bought two white wines and a chocolate milk.

He carried them and the child over to his wife. They leaned together. Christine saw the wife look at her.

Anne and Luther leaned against the counter.

"Beck's," said Luther.

"Same," said Anne.

"Same, sane," Christine sang.

Luther looked at her. "Haven't changed a bit, have you?" he said.

Sweet man. Same, sweet sane man, she thought. Here in the land of the living, this mule-owner understood her.

She patted his sinewy arm through the red-plaid shirt.

"Not a bit," she said. "I haven't changed at all."

Cold November rain slammed against the kitchen window of the old clapboard house at the end of the mile-long dirt track called Wildwood Road. Marta glanced up and saw reflections of the light over the sink, pots stacked for washing, the flicker of a candle set on the table. She sat between her eight-year-old son Ezra and her seven-year-old foster child Sammy. Sammy hunched over the table, forearms corraling his plate, his chin almost in his mashed potatoes. He held his fork in his right fist, grasped his plate in his left. He didn't look at his food. He only looked at Ezra. Ezra sat across from Sammy on Marta's right. He held a carrot stick in one hand and was reading *The Life of General MacArthur.*

The table, a six-foot slab of redwood, rested on a sawhorse and two yellow filing cabinets. Marta had bought the cabinets off-island in Seattle two months ago. The left cabinet's top drawer was open. A manila folder labeled *Letters to Sammy* rested on her lap. It held letters from his mother, Christine—six or seven pages each in handwriting so illegible Marta couldn't read entire paragraphs. One letter contained a photograph of Christine naked, her arms around a man wearing a chef's hat.

When it arrived, Sammy had studied it.

"Don't know that one," he'd shrugged, and carefully put the picture back into the envelope.

Another folder marked *Sammy's Custody Hearings* lay open on the table. Marta had pushed her plate to one side and was making a list of witnesses for the hearing this Friday. The last hearing had been postponed because no one had told Sammy's lawyer the date. The social workers and their lawyer, Christine and her lawyer, and

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Marta and Sammy had waited in the Court House hallway. When Sammy went up to Christine and said, "Hi, Mom," she'd looked silently over his head. He'd sat back down next to Marta on the wooden bench, folded his hands in his lap, and cried, silently, for two hours until the bailiff came out of the courtroom and told them the judge had postponed their hearing. Sammy's lawyer was in Port Townsend on another case. After that, Marta had decided to make a list herself and call the lawyers, social workers, and witnesses a few days before court to make sure.

She wondered if other foster parents made these lists. She was the first foster parent on the island in twenty years. She wouldn't even be one except Sammy, who was Ezra's classmate, had kept calling her.

"Marta, can I come over? I'm hungry."

"Marta, I'm scared. I'm all alone."

"Marta, I can't get into the bathroom. My mom's passed out on the floor."

Marta had gone over, found Christine unconscious, Sammy cradling a gin bottle. She called the police and took Sammy home with her. She had put him in the guest room, tucked him in, and kissed him. He lay rigid. When she called goodnight from the door, he didn't answer. But when she woke in the morning, he was asleep on the floor by her bed.

Weeks later, after he had been shuttled between herself and Christine, after Christine had given him away, then taken him back, the social workers told Marta Sammy would be sent off-island to live with strangers until his case was settled. Marta had heard herself say, "He can stay with me."

In the weeks that followed, Sammy came into her room every night—at first only after she was asleep, then earlier. He'd crawl onto her bed, his eyes lowered, and sit silently looking at his knees. If Ezra had come into her room like that, she would have hugged him and led him back to his bed. But Sammy's mute and downcast presence made her want to reassure him, nurture him until he was strong enough to sleep in his own room, in his own bed. She didn't know how to help him. If she hugged him, he froze. So she told him stories of her childhood, of Ezra's. She told him about pets they'd had, places they'd been, holidays.

"At Christmas," she said, "we put up our tree in the living room, in front of the bookcases. We usually decorate it Christmas Eve, or the night before that. Ezra hangs the balls on the lower branches,

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I do the higher ones. We make popcorn ropes, but usually we eat them before they get on the tree."

"I never had a Christmas," Sammy said. He'd never interrupted her stories before.

"You celebrate Hannukah?"

Sammy kept his eyes down.

"Are you Jewish, Sammy?" Marta asked.

"I'm nothing." He looked at her. "Do you have an angel for the top, Marta?"

She had seen the perfect angel in a Los Angeles shop the fall she and Darren got married, an angel with golden hair, pink cheeks, a ruffled silvery dress. She wanted to buy it, but Darren refused. It was a symbol, he said, of the worst sort of superstition. He had just completed his Ph.D. in psychology and had written his thesis on "The Destructive Nature of Religious Symbolism in American Society." Marta suspected, as she stood in the hot California sun peering through the store window at a New England Christmas, at Darren's reflection wavering over a display church, that he felt all his academic honors and even his degree would be taken from him if he put an angel on his tree.

"A bare tree's the thing," he'd said. "If you have to have a tree at all. A Scotch pine. Something natural, unadorned."

That Christmas he bought the tree and centered it in their living room. You had to walk around it to sit on the couch or to look out the window. It was still there at Easter, tilting in the sand, surrounded by a skirt of its rust-colored needles. Darren wouldn't throw it out, he said, until he'd paid his taxes. Marta wasn't sure if she was more embarrassed by the naked tree in their living room or its carcass on the sidewalk out front on April fifteenth.

"We don't have an angel, Sammy," she told the little boy on her bed. "Every year I think I'll get one, but I never do."

Sammy yawned and closed his eyes. "I could make you one," he said. "I bet I could make a good angel."

A few days later, he stopped coming into her room.

Sammy stuffed his mouth with potatoes, teeth clanking on the fork with each bite. Without swallowing, he shoved half a sausage in with the potatoes.

"Chew with your mouth closed," Marta said.

He closed his mouth. Food dribbled from the corners.

"Wipe it," she said.

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Without looking away from Ezra, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his new yellow shirt.

When he lived with his mother, he'd been dressed in browns and purples—dirty, tattered clothes either too small or too big. When the social workers and the police took him from Christine they brought him to Marta with only what he wore: brown cords, a brown sweatshirt, torn sneakers, no underwear. Christine wouldn't send any of his clothes or toys. Marta shopped for him that first week, buying yellows, creams, and deep, clear blues the color of his eyes.

She'd cut his hair herself, carefully combing it so as not to hurt him. She cut away an egg-sized mat behind his ear, the way she did on the dog when no one had brushed him.

"Bet he's got cooties," Ezra had said. "Ooties-cay. Ammy-say's got ooties-cay."

"Up yours," Sammy said. "*You* got crabs. *You* got the herpes, V.D., the crap."

"Clap," Marta corrected.

"What's that?" Ezra asked.

"A sickness," she answered quickly, before Sammy could. "Hold still, Sam. Ezra, go do your homework."

Nearly three months had passed since then. They'd been to court twice. Friday's hearing would be the third.

The rain had let up. Marta leaned across the sink, looked out the window over the tree-ringed pond. Flickering through the branches of the madrone and willow trees that bordered her pond she could see a light in the Timms's farmhouse at the foot of the hill. If the kids would stay quiet, she thought, she could hear the frogs. It seemed as though she'd heard only children for months. She imagined the house empty except for herself—the way it used to be when Ezra went to Los Angeles to visit his father. She'd pour herself a glass of wine, put on her down vest, and go out to the pond, sit on the big rock, and listen to the bullfrogs. She'd look up to the sky, then down to the water, see the stars reflected.

Beyond the Timms's, the last ferry was heading out from Friday Harbor. The next one wouldn't sail until nine tomorrow morning. No one could come, no one could go. It was like having the light turned out before you were ready to sleep.

Sammy scooped another glob of potatoes, got some up his nose. He still hadn't swallowed. Marta reached for his hand. "Now listen." Ezra looked up from his book. Sammy ignored her. "This is going to be our last meal like this," she said. "You've lived with us for

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months, Sam. It's time you learned to eat properly. You're going to take smaller bites, chew with your mouth closed, and swallow before you put more food in."

He opened his mouth.

"You're disgusting," Ezra said.

Sammy started to answer.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Marta said. "Eat quietly. No more slurping and smacking."

"What's for dessert?" he mumbled.

"Did you hear what I said?"

He chugged his milk.

Marta grabbed the glass from his hand, took his plate away, and put it next to hers. He stared at her.

"There's not going to be any dessert unless you eat properly. Understand?"

He turned away from her.

"Answer me!"

"Okay!"

"Ha," Ezra muttered.

"Who asked you, jerk?"

"Shut up, both of you. Here's your plate, Sammy." Marta set it in front of him. "Remember what I said."

She turned to Ezra. "And you. No more reading at the table."

"*You* do."

"Well *you're* not going to."

"All right," he said. "Jeeze."

"Now eat."

Marta went back to her list but couldn't think of anyone to add to it. She looked around the kitchen. The walls were covered with Ezra's drawings of World War II: Rommel's tanks were scotch-taped to the oven door, flags of the Allies and Axis decorated the cabinet next to the sink, the Normandy Invasion covered the wall by the phone.

Sammy's drawings hung on the refrigerator, each picture crammed into the lower-left-hand corner of the paper: a chimney, a skyscraper, a volcano. And one self-portrait—a tiny, featureless figure. "I lov Marta," he'd written.

The children's heads were bent over their plates, Ezra's hair a fluff of black curls like his father's, Sammy's straight and fine, the color of daffodils like his mother's. Ezra picked at his food, trying to dig the fat out of the sausage. Sammy stared at him, shoveling.

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"What did they call this food in England when you were little, Mom?" Ezra asked.

He loved stories about her twelfth summer. Her father, a sailor, divorced from her mother and away at sea months at a time, took her to the Isle of Wight, to Bembridge, to Cowes and Ryde. They'd sailed around the island, then crossed the Solent to Portsmouth. He let her take the helm, steer across the choppy water. He didn't take over from her until they entered the harbor.

She speared some sausage and potato with her fork and fed Ezra.

"Bangers and mash," she said.

"Tell me about the vinegar," he begged.

"It was called Honegar. It was made of—"

The phone rang.

"Marta? This is Anne Timms from the farm."

Marta flinched at the loud voice and held the phone away from her ear.

"Luther and I came over on the last boat tonight. Been to Anacortes, visitin' his folks."

Marta brought the receiver to her mouth. "Anne, we're just having—"

"Sammy's mother Christine was on the boat," Anne shouted. "Did you know she was back?"

"Oh, no. Already?"

Ezra looked up. Sammy reached across the table and helped himself to Ezra's carrots.

"Cut it out," Marta growled.

"She's a mess," Anne said. "Probably drugs this time. It's always them or booze."

Sammy's fork was poised over Ezra's potatoes. Marta reached across the table and grabbed it, stuck it in her hip pocket, and made a note to add Anne's name to her list of witnesses.

"What do you want from me, Anne?"

"What should I do? She's wacko. She have a shrink?"

"The judge appointed Hilde Cassell." Marta added Hilde Cassell to her list. "Her number's in the book."

"I think *you* should call Dr. Cassell, Marta," Anne said. "After all, you took that child away from his mother."

Marta felt the heat rise around her eyes. "I don't see it that way, Anne."

There was a pause.

"Luther and I were wonderin'—" Anne said.

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Ezra and Sammy glared at each other. Sammy's cheekbones had turned crimson. He opened his mouth, smacking. Ezra mimicked him.

"Is it true she used to sleep with him?" Anne asked. "That's what they say. I didn't know a little boy could, you know, *do* anything."

Sammy spat his food into Ezra's face.

"Damn you!" Ezra screamed.

Marta hung up.

"Can't I even answer the goddamned phone without you two going at it?"

"I hate him!" Ezra screamed. "I hate him! I never wanted him here. First you left my dad, then you brought *him* here. I'm the one who has to be with him all the time, not you! I hate you both!"

Sammy looked at Marta. "Could I have made my mother pregnant?"

"Oh, Christ—no!" she said. "We'll talk about that later."

She sat at the table and took a deep breath.

"Now finish eating."

Ezra glared at her. "I said I hate you both!"

"Who gives a shit," Sammy said.

Marta slammed her hand on the table. "Go to your room!"

Sammy's eyes turned to her, huge, blue, amazed. "Why? What did I do?"

"Now!"

He threw his plate against the refrigerator and ran upstairs.

Marta bent to pick up the pieces.

"Listen, Ezra. I know this is a hard time—"

"He's nuts," he said.

"It'll get better. I promise. It's this hearing coming up—"

Marta stacked pieces of china on her open palm, white triangles, all sizes, their sharp edges ragged. The plate had been her mother's. Everyday china, her mother had called it. To Marta's seven-year-old mind that phrase conjured Oriental men in rice paddies. She imagined her mother set the table with treasures her father had brought back from his trips before she was born, when they were still married. After she told her mother that, her mother would press her palms together and bow every time anyone said ordinary china.

Marta paused, listening for Sammy. Silence. "It just takes time for things to settle down," she told Ezra. The phone rang.

"Marta, Doctor Hilde Cassell speaking. I've had a call from an Anne Timms. You gave her my name."

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"That's right."

"You've always got time for everyone else," Ezra said.

There was a crash upstairs.

"He's in my room! Mom, he's in my room!"

"Hang on, Hilde." Marta dangled the phone on its cord and tossed the broken pieces on the table.

"Stay here, Ez."

Sammy sat on Ezra's bed, crosslegged and rocking, surrounded by Ezra's stuffed animals—a leopard that roared, a huge rabbit dressed in Ezra's outgrown overalls, and a furless teddy bear named George that used to be Marta's. He was pulling their eyes out.

Marta grabbed his wrists. "I told you to go to your room!"

He looks like his mother, she thought.

"I want this room."

"This is Ezra's room."

"Not any more." He pulled away from her.

"Leave Ezra's toys alone, Sammy. You have your own toys."

"I'm too old for toys. I'm my mom's big boy."

Marta put her hand on his shoulder.

"You're a very little boy, Sammy. Now you're going to your room and you're going to stay there."

"I'm her man!" he wailed.

Marta pulled him into his room, sat him on his bed, handed him his own teddy bear—the one she'd bought him—told him to stay put, and closed the door.

In the kitchen, Ezra was back with *General MacArthur*. Marta took the book from him and told him to scrape and rinse the dishes. She swept the broken plate from the table, threw the pieces in the garbage, and picked up the receiver.

"Yes, Hilde. I'm sorry."

"You know," Hilde said, "schizophrenia is genetic and hereditary. Add to that the trauma, probably irreversible, of prolonged sexual abuse."

"Is that what you called to tell me?" Marta doodled concentric circles over the Normandy Invasion. "Ezra, stop splashing."

"No. I called because I want you to understand once and for all that I am not Christine's therapist."

"But, Hilde, I was there when the judge appointed you! I've seen her going into your office. You're supposed to testify at the hearing Friday!"

"I am not, repeat *not*, her therapist."

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"I don't understand."

"She's a very disturbed woman." Hilde pronounced each word as though Marta might have trouble understanding. "She threatened me and my family. I do not want you telling people I'm her therapist."

"But Judge Potter appointed you!"

"I have *never* been her therapist."

Marta took the fork from her pocket and stabbed at the soapsuds in the sink. Ezra was using his fingers as bullets, firing at the stainless-steel faucet, making explosion noises with each hit.

"Fine, Hilde. Fine."

"Another thing."

"What?"

"My supervisor feels I should let you know that Christine is threatening to kill you and your son. What's his name?"

"Ezra."

Ezra looked at her. She covered the mouthpiece. "Lock the doors, Ez."

"Again?"

Hilde said, "Doctor Morrison felt we had an obligation to tell you."

"Did you tell the police?"

Hilde sighed. "Marta, we have done you a favor. We have stretched confidentiality."

"Thanks."

"I don't want any more calls. Understand?"

Marta hung up and dropped the fork into the soapy water.

Ezra came back into the kitchen. "I locked the doors."

"Ezra, I'm sorry."

He stood by the phone, pulled the coiled cord taut, let it spring back, pulled it taut. His father's habit.

"Mom, all Sammy does is follow me around. When I go to the bathroom, he tells dirty jokes through the keyhole. When *he* goes, he wants me to watch. All he thinks about is food and sex. He says life's an orgy. What's that?"

Marta sat down and patted her knee. "Come here."

Ezra sat on her lap.

"Mom—"

"Wait a minute," she said. "Ezra, Sammy's going through a terrible time. He doesn't know what's going to happen to him. He has to go to court and speak to the judge. He's afraid. He's been taken away from his mother. He misses her."

"Give him back."

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"We can't do that."

Ezra sighed.

"What about me then? I could go live with Dad. Then you'd only have Sammy to take care of."

"Ezra, this isn't going to last forever. Just until after the hearing, until the judge decides what's best. I love you. I don't want to have Sammy and not you. You're my little boy."

"So's he, now."

"It's not the same. He can't take your place."

"Ha." He banged his heel against the file cabinet.

"Tell you what," Marta said. "Why don't we go out to dinner tomorrow? Papa's Pizza is still open."

"You and me? Just us?"

"I meant all of us."

Ezra slumped.

"I can't just leave him here all alone, Ez."

"Lock him in the closet."

"Ezra!"

"That's what his mother did. He's used to it."

"That's awful! Imagine if I treated you that way. Don't you feel sorry for him?"

Ezra twisted around to face her. "He's got food hidden behind his radiator—candy bars, 'n crushed Triscuits, 'n moldy orange peels, 'n 'gurts."

"Yogurts?"

"Blueberry. He's got green blueberry 'gurts behind his bed. First they had white mold, now green. He got them out of the garbage."

"He doesn't eat them, does he?"

"He says he's gonna make *me* eat 'em."

The phone rang. Frowning, Marta reached over his head to answer it.

"Your father."

She handed it to Ezra. He climbed off her lap and leaned against the wall.

"Is this you, Daddy?"

Marta wondered how Darren would react to what was going on. Over and over he'd told her her caring for Sammy was "gratuitous cruelty" to Ezra.

"Fine, Daddy." Ezra twisted the cord. "Well, not really. It's Sammy—"

Marta looked at him, then started up the stairs to check on Sam.

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Partway up, she sat on a tread and rested her head on her knees. She closed her eyes, remembering a picnic on deck with her father. "Sweets for my pebble," he'd said, offering her a tiny pink pastry. "If only it could always be like this. My pebble and her dad. We could sail the world forever. Think your mother would mind?"

Her mother would mind, even though she was in the hospital again, no one knew for how long. She wished her mother would stay there forever. Maybe her father would come back then— Marta could cook for him, scrambled eggs and pancakes smeared with peanut butter. Or maybe she could really live with him on the boat. Marta remembered pushing the pastry away. She knew she'd have to go home.

Now, she stood and climbed the rest of the way.

Ezra got to the spitting part.

"And then he said a bad word," Ezra recounted. "I can't say it. It's a swear. No, Dadda, I really can't say it. No, not that one. Not that one, either—"

Marta hadn't heard him sound that babyish since he was four. As her hand reached the doorknob, Ezra called, "Mom! Dad wants you!"

She went into her room, sat on the edge of the bed, exhaled, and picked up the receiver.

"Hi."

"I think your treatment of your son is despicable," he hissed and hung up.

"Shit," she whispered to the dial tone.

She sat pressing her hands over her ears. Then she lifted the phone, carried it to the bureau, and shut it—receiver off—in the drawer. She looked in the mirror, searching for Ezra's features in her own. But Ezra looked like Darren. She looked at her eyes. Getting older.

There, where she wanted to see Ezra, she saw Sammy—his eyes blue like hers, his face wide at the cheekbones, nose small, chin rounded.

Like me, she thought.

She remembered her mother in the hospital, bleary and shaky from Antabuse and Thorazine, wrapped in a tatty blue robe, so unlike her usual meticulous clothes. Her mother looking pale and flabby instead of fit and tan. Her mother leaning toward her, palms pressed together as if someone had said "ordinary china." Her mother weaving in her wheelchair.

"You bring me a bottle, Pebble? A drop in the ocean?"

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Marta closed her eyes, shook her head, ran her fingers through her hair. She could hear the big fir tree by the side of the house scraping against the clapboards. The wind had picked up. Tomorrow would be great sailing weather, her father's sort of day. And what sort of day, she wondered, is mine?

CRIMINALIMERICK

A HEADY THOUGHT

by D.R. BENSEN

Though Raffles, the amateur cracksman,
Has little to fear from the tax man,
His larcenous trail
Might lead him to jail,
But at least they've abolished the axeman.

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Ed. note: In affectionate memory of Philip Atkey (a.k.a. Barry Perowne), 1908–1986.

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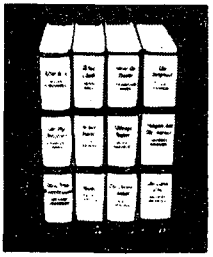

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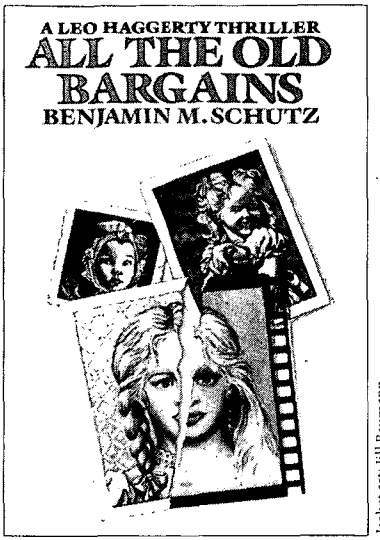

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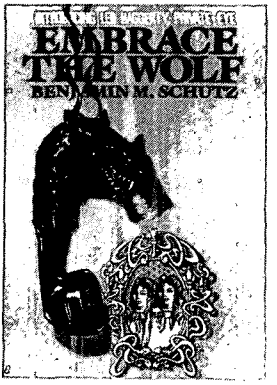

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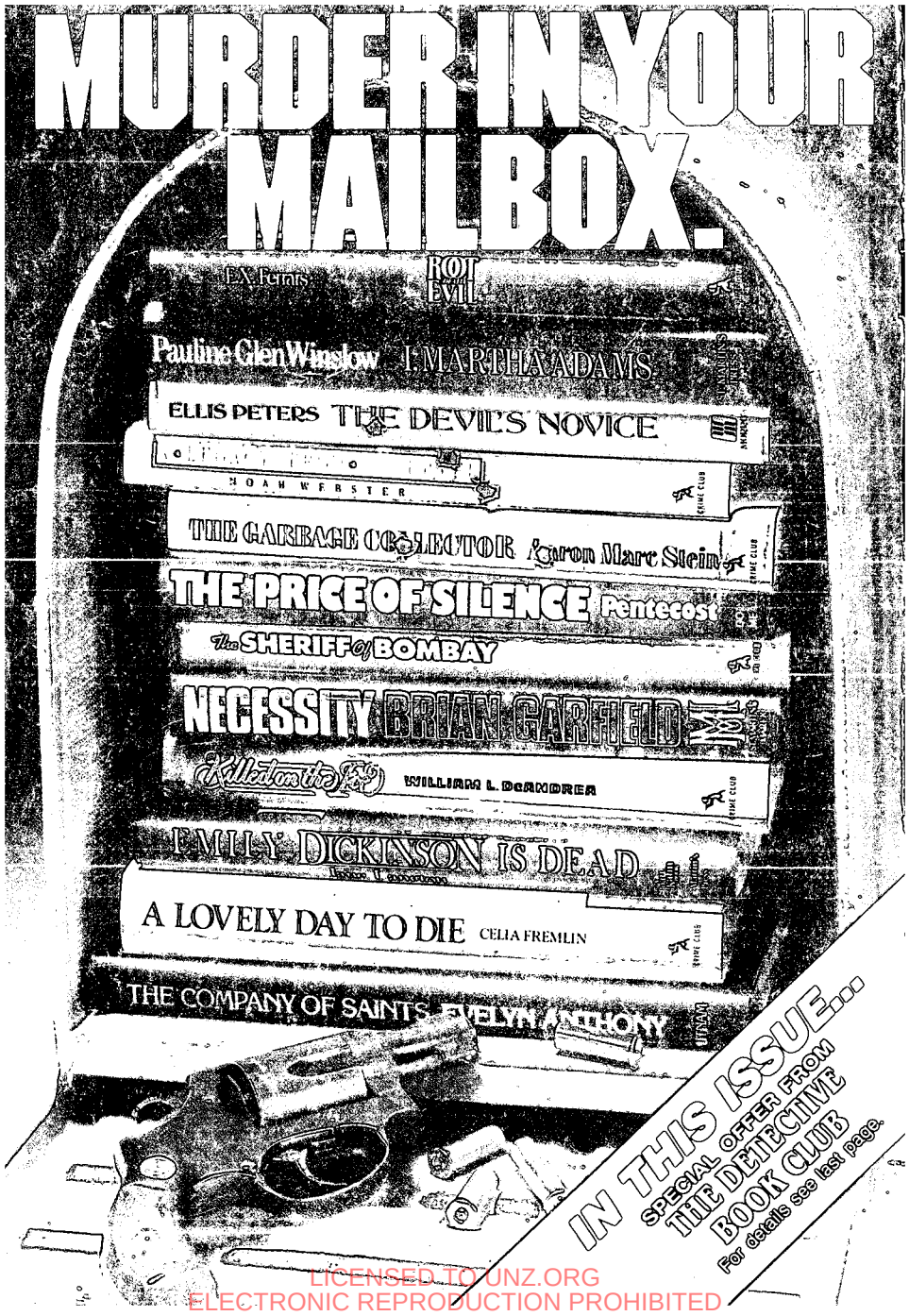

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